

Harry Potter and the Sect of the Serpent

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CHAPTER ONE -- The Heat

The sun beat down mercilessly on the parched square gardens and scorching black pavement of Privet Drive in Little Whinging, Surrey. Most of the residents of Privet Drive were carrying out their summer rituals, safely entombed in their respectable square houses, enjoying what little relief the cool interiors might afford them. Only one resident was not staying inside like a normal person, but then, Harry Potter could hardly be considered normal by Privet Drive standards.

At the moment, Harry was lying quite still under a large shade tree in the play park at the end of Magnolia Road, his long, somewhat gangly legs stuck out in the grass, and hands resting under his untidy mop of black hair. He had taken off his round rimmed glasses and was staring up at the blurred shapes of the big heavy branches and still green leaves above him. This was how he had spent most of his afternoons in the weeks he'd been back at the Dursley's for the summer. His family, such as it was, had decided that they wanted nothing to do with him, which suited him fine. They had taken to ignoring him as much as humanly possible, except to ask him to pass the salt at the dinner table, tell him to do his chores, or remind him to write to his friends in the wizard world to let them know he wasn't being mistreated. Apparently the thought of Mad-Eye Moody, Tonks, and Mr. Weasley descending on Private Drive to inquire as to Harry's wellbeing had given them quite a new interest in his correspondence.

Indeed, this summer on Privet Drive had easily seen the fewest rows with his family since he had first found out he was a wizard and gone away to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry five years ago, but the change hadn't made Harry's life there much better. Occasionally, he found himself longing to pick a fight with his cousin Dudley or Uncle Vernon, just to have something to occupy his mind and distract him from his own thoughts. Wisely however, he'd so far decided against it.

Each day was pretty much like the last. After breakfast he washed up the dishes and then went up to his room and either lay on his bed staring at a book (without ever really reading) or staring out the window. After lunch, his aunt and uncle would settle down in the parlor to have a good long chat, complaining to one another loudly about the heat, which Harry could take for only so long, and he'd sneak out the kitchen door and head down to the play park where, as today, he would invariably lie under a shady tree and try not to think.

But the thing he'd discovered about trying not to think was that it was about as easy as trying not to breathe. The things he longed to forget, like Lord Voldemort, and Death Eaters, and prophecies, and a mysterious arch with a black veil that whispered at him, continually swirled about in his mind uninvited and unwanted.

Occasionally, the monotony would be broken by a letter from his best friends Ron and Hermione, but even they had very little of interest to say. Hermione was on holiday with her parents in Sweden, and Ron and his little sister Ginny had been staying with their brothers Fred and George at their flat in Diagon Ally while their parents did mysterious and top secret things for the Order of the Phoenix. Apart from the postcards of pristine Alpine lakes and the tales of new joke shop items gone awry, neither of his friends had anything very interesting to say. Harry had gotten a note from Ron only the day before, but hadn't bothered to write back to him. *What was there to say? Glad to hear you're having a good summer. Me, I'm doing swell. Just worrying about the murder I'm meant to commit, but other than that...*

Harry shook himself and sat up abruptly. If there was one thing he was avoiding thinking about above all others, it was that.

"Oh good," said a voice from somewhere to his right, "I was beginning to think you might be dead." Harry swung around to squint in the direction of the voice as he pawed the grass beside him for his glasses. Someone was sitting on one of the swings nearby. Finding his glasses at last, he shoved them on his face, and found himself staring at a girl he'd never seen before. She was sitting in the swing swaying back and forth slightly, her long tan legs dangling in the dust, one slender tanned arm crooked around the chain. She put her head to one side and smiled at him.

"Hi," she said. He blinked at her. She had wavy blonde hair pulled back on one side with a sparkling hairpin to reveal a two inch wide streak of shockingly pink hair that fell neatly around her oval face. She had on a black tank top with rhinestones on it and a pair of denim shorts. He was sure he had never seen her before. He would have remembered.

"Hi?"

She got up and walked towards him her hand held out in front of her. "I'm Gwyn. Gwyn Griffith." Harry shook her hand, still feeling like he might be asleep or dreaming.

"Harry Potter."

"Nice to meet you," she said, sitting down cross legged on the grass next to him. She was wearing black flip flops with matching rhinestones on them, and her toenails were painted the same shocking color of pink as her hair. "I was hoping I might find some people my own age around

here. I'm visiting my great aunt and, well, she's not the coolest person to hang out with, you know what I mean?" She smiled at him.

"You're American," Harry blurted out. Gwyn laughed.

"Yeah. Was it the accent or the hair that gave me away?" Harry shook his head and blinked again.

"The accent. Sorry. I'm feeling a little..." he paused. "Slow. Must be the heat." She shrugged.

"This isn't so bad really. It's much hotter where I'm from."

"Where's that?"

"Well, my dad lives in Washington D.C., but I go to school in New Mexico."

"Wow," Harry said, immediately wishing he had said something cooler. Gwyn plucked a long blade of grass and begin twirling it around between her fingers. Harry watched, fascinated, and racked his brain for something interesting to say.

"So... do you go to school around here?" she asked, looking up at him through long dark lashes. Her eyes were bright blue. Harry gulped loudly.

"No I go to, uh, boarding school," he finished lamely. He had almost said Hogwarts. He realized a bit belatedly that even though he'd grown up with Muggles, he had no idea how to talk to non-magical people any more.

"Oh yeah? Me too. I mean, my dad is sending me to boarding school here in the fall. I can't remember the name of it though." She giggled. "Everything here has such funny names."

"Yeah," Harry said, "I mean, I guess. I mean, why aren't you going back to New Mexico?"

"Dad works for the government. He's kind of an ambassador, so we'll be over here for a while." She sighed, flicking the grass she'd been playing with away. "Dad's busy setting up the apartment in London and he sent me out here to stay with Aunt Arabella until he's ready for me I guess."

Suddenly, from across the play park, Harry heard a chorus of malicious laughter. "Oh no," he said, getting to his feet. Gwyn followed, brushing grass out of her lap. On the opposite side of the park, Harry's cousin Dudley and his gang of hangers-on sat lounging on a picnic table, smoking cigarettes and watching them. Since Dudley had found fame on the junior heavyweight boxing circuit the previous year, his retinue of admirers had

grown considerably, and now encompassed pretty much every underage thug and hoodlum in the neighborhood. Dudley was roughly the size of a small elephant, and his gang of friends was hardly less imposing. His boxing hobby had turned the once flabby boy into a viciously strong young man.

"Oy!" Dudley's friend Piers cried with malice, "The freak's got 'imself a girlfriend!" Harry felt his face go instantly hot.

"Who's that?" Gwyn asked quietly.

"My cousin, Dudley and his friends," Harry growled. "Just ignore them."

"What's wrong with her hair?" another boy called Gordon laughed loudly.

"She's a freak just like Potter!" Piers spat. The whole gang erupted into a chorus of snickers and jeers. Dudley laughed nervously, looking torn between his innate desire to humiliate his cousin and his basic underlying fear of what Harry might do to him. He and Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon were still quite convinced that Harry had attacked Dudley in the alley last summer and not protected him as was actually the truth.

"Come on," Harry said, turning his back on his cousin's gang, "let's just--" but Gwyn was already gone. Horrified, Harry saw that she was marching straight back across the park towards Piers.

"Who the hell do you think you are calling *me* a freak?" she demanded. For a moment, the boys looked stunned. Then Dudley laughed.

"We'll call you whatever we like," he sneered. Harry frowned, an overwhelming anger bubbling up from his stomach. Obviously, Dudley's anxiety over what Harry might do to him didn't extend to Gwyn. He marched across the lawn behind her.

"You won't if you want to keep your face!" she yelled, "Although, it might be an improvement if I rearranged it for you!" The boys began to laugh.

"You?" Piers said in disbelief.

"Lay off!" Harry shouted. The boys, who had momentarily forgotten him, all stood up from around the picnic table and moved towards him, except Dudley, who remained where he was, eyeing Harry warily.

"Or what?" Piers demanded, emboldened by his friends standing all around him, outnumbering Harry and Gwyn more than three to one.

"Or you'll be sorry," Harry growled. He reached around to his back pocket where he habitually carried his wand. Recognizing the move, Dudley leaped to his feet.

"No!" he yelled suddenly. Piers and the other boys turned to stare at him in disbelief. "I mean..." Dudley faltered, trying not to look frightened "he's not worth the trouble." He looked from one of his friends to the next. "And you can't hit a girl," he added as an afterthought.

"I'd like to see you try!" Gwyn laughed. Piers looked like he was about to try when Dudley grabbed his arm.

"Come on," he said coaxingly, "let's go sneak into that new movie at the Cineplex." Reluctantly, Piers turned and followed Dudley, with the rest of the boys falling into step behind. As they left, Dudley shot an angry look over his shoulder at Harry and Gwyn.

"Thanks for backing me up," Gwyn said as they watched the boys leave, "but I had everything under control."

"Oh, right," Harry said, his face reddening, "I mean, I never doubted it." Suddenly Gwyn smiled brightly, and Harry felt a familiar swooping sensation in his stomach, as though he'd just attempted the Wronski Feign on his broom.

"You're all right, Harry Potter," she said as she gazed at him appreciatively. Harry turned away from her gaze, feeling suddenly very embarrassed.

"Oh jeez," she said suddenly, "I've got to go. Aunt Arabella likes me to be home for tea. Will I see you here tomorrow?" Harry nodded vigorously. Gwyn smiled. "Great! Well, see ya, Harry!" She took off towards Wisteria Walk, her hair bouncing behind her with every step.

"Yeah! See ya!" Harry called belatedly. Gwyn turned to wave at him and smile before turning the corner.

Harry sank into the nearest swing. He suddenly felt very woozy, and it had nothing to do with the heat.

The next day, Harry was up earlier than usual. Hermione had finally convinced him to buy a few sets of Muggle clothes that actually fit, as opposed to his oversized hand-me-downs from Dudley, so Harry pulled out his nicest pair of jeans, a dark green tee shirt that was actually his size, and a pair of lace ups that weren't coming apart at the seams. He didn't wear these clothes around the Dursleys much for fear that they might wonder where he'd gotten the money for new clothes, and that that might lead them to knowledge of a certain bank vault on Diagon Alley that was filled with Harry's small fortune in wizard gold that had been left to him by his parents.

Once dressed he stood in front of the mirror examining his reflection. He had filled out a bit since last year, he decided. His arms and legs no

longer looked as though they were several sizes too large for his body, and several years of regular meals at Hogwarts had done their part to add some muscle to his wiry frame. The green tee shirt had been Hermione's idea, saying that it would compliment the color of his bright green eyes, and, he mused, she had been right. He picked up a comb and tried to tame his wild black hair into some semblance of order, but it simply wouldn't obey him. Giving up, he ran his hand through it instead, and was reminded of another dark haired boy sitting under a tree ruffling his hair to impress a girl. Harry smiled slightly and ruffled it a bit more. It had worked for James...

Harry finished washing up after breakfast in record time and, rather than spend the morning in the customary isolation of his room, he sped off towards the play park. He walked around it several times, looking for a good spot to wait, and finally deciding that his regular tree was as good as any, he sat down on the grass. Nervously, he rearranged himself several times, trying out different poses to make the best impression. Realizing suddenly how stupid he was being, he laughed out loud and decided not to worry about it. It felt good. He hadn't really laughed in a while.

The morning wore on into afternoon, and Harry began to wish he'd thought to bring something with him for lunch. Trying to ignore the rumblings from his stomach, Harry stretched out on the grass and closed his eyes.

After what seemed like only a moment, Harry felt something tickling his nose. He reached up to brush it away, and his hand collided with something warm and soft. His eyes snapped open, and he found himself staring into two bright blue eyes, round and wide with laughter. Gwyn was sitting next to him in the shade, and had been tickling his nose with a long blade of grass. Harry suddenly realized that the warm soft thing he had caught in his hand, was in fact her hand. He let her go and pushed away quickly into a sitting position.

"Hi again," she said with a giggle. "You fell asleep."

"Yeah," Harry said, his face burning, "I guess I did." Suddenly, his stomach growled loudly and Gwyn giggled.

"Hungry?" she asked, eyebrows arched. Harry felt like his face might catch fire at any moment.

"Yeah," he said with a forced laugh, "I didn't have any lunch..." Gwyn made to stand up. Her hair was pulled back in a pony tail today and the pink streak created an interesting stripe on the side of her head and curling down her shoulders with the rest of her soft blonde hair. She was wearing a small, baby blue tee shirt with the words *What are YOU looking at?* silk screened across the front in navy over a pale pink cotton skirt.

Harry quickly averted his eyes, thinking that Gwyn probably knew full well what people were looking at when they were reading her shirt.

"Well, come on!" she said playfully, extending her hand to help him up. "Let's get you something to eat before you pass out from hunger." Harry awkwardly accepted her hand and got to his feet, but he quickly released it as soon as he was upright.

The two made their way up Magnolia Road to the main street where there were an assortment of small shops. Gwyn led the way down to the corner where a tiny store barely the size of Harry's bedroom was doing a lively business. Since he had never had any Muggle money to spend, Harry had never spent much time around the shops when he was home for the summer, and he was surprised to see that busy little shop was an ice cream parlor.

Gwyn pushed ahead through the crowd, but Harry hung back. "What's wrong?" she asked.

"I haven't got any money," he replied solemnly. "You go ahead." She grinned at him and rolled her eyes.

"Don't be such a dork," she said grabbing his hand and pulling him forward through the crowd and up to the counter. Gwyn proceeded to order two scoops of ice cream in a cone, so Harry did the same, and she paid for them both. Harry felt a little stupid, letting her pay for his ice cream, but the way she kept smiling at him, he guessed she didn't mind.

They wandered up and down the road eating their ice creams and looking in the windows of the different shops. For a moment, Harry was reminded of the Hogsmead trip he'd spent with Cho, but he quickly pushed that memory aside. Gwyn could not have been more different from Cho. For one thing, she wasn't crying all over him every other minute.

At one point, they saw Dudley and his gang emerge from a candy shop, their pockets bulging with stolen sweets, but they seemed in too much of a hurry to pay much attention Harry and Gwyn. Harry grinned: Aunt Petunia would be very disappointed to know that her precious son was cheating on his diet.

"So what do you like to do, Harry?" Gwyn asked as they walked slowly back to the play park in the late afternoon sun. "What's your thing? What are you famous for?" Harry looked at her sharply, but the innocent smile on her face calmed him. *She's a Muggle he reminded himself, she doesn't have any idea...*

"Nothing," he said happily, "I'm not famous at all."

"Aw, come on," Gwyn prompted. "There must be something! Maybe you're... the class clown?" Harry shook his head.

"My mate Ron's more the class clown than I am," he replied.

She squinted at him appraisingly. "Okaaay... maybe... the brain. You're a book nerd, aren't you?" Harry laughed.

"Hardly! That's my friend Hermione. She's top of our class." Gwyn sunk down into the grass under the shady tree, thinking hard.

"I've got it!" she said, snapping her fingers. "You're a jock! Sports hero of the school! Captain of your team!" Harry blushed. He had been picked to play seeker for his house quiddich team his first year at Hogwarts, making him the youngest seeker in a century, and he had helped his team win loads of games, but he had no idea how he was going to explain quiddich to a Muggle.

"Er..." he replied noncommittally.

"You are!" she giggled. "You're just too modest to talk about it." She laughed right out loud and Harry found himself laughing with her.

"Well, I'm not captain..." he said finally. Gwyn sighed and rolled her eyes as Harry lay back on the grass.

"All right, all right. We'll just stick with jock then," she capitulated. For a while they sat there in silence. Harry couldn't believe how good it felt to meet someone who didn't know his whole life story the minute she heard his name. Gwyn had no preconceptions of him, no expectations. She had heard no stories about "the boy who lived" and had read no headlines proclaiming him to be mentally unstable, or alternately, savior of the world. And yet, she still seemed interested in him, still wanted to spend time with him and get to know him.

Suddenly he realized that she was leaning over him, frowning at something. She put out her hand and gently smoothed back the fringe of hair from his forehead. He froze at her touch, wondering what she was thinking, bracing himself for the inevitable questions.

"How did you get that scar?" she asked, staring at it. Harry made a sort of shrugging motion. He didn't want to lie to her, but he couldn't tell her the truth...

"I've had it since I was a baby," he began slowly. "My aunt and uncle told me that I got it in the car crash that killed my parents." *Ok, he thought, they did tell you that, so that was sort of the truth...*

"Oh Harry..." she said softly. She took her hand away and sat back. "I'm sorry. I..."

"That's OK," he said quickly, sitting up again. "You didn't know." She shook her head and smiled slightly.

"It's getting late," she said finally, "I should probably go." Harry nodded, but he wanted to stop her. He didn't want the afternoon to end.

CHAPTER TWO

It was almost dark when Harry finally found his feet taking him back in the direction of the Dursley's, his stomach still growling noisily. He whistled tunelessly as he walked, his hands shoved deep into the pockets of his jeans. Suddenly, from nowhere, Dudley sidled up next to him. Harry took a large step away from him, but Dudley didn't get the hint.

"I saw you with her again today," he said in a mocking voice. "So who is she?" Harry ignored him.

"Is she a... a *wizard* -- like you?" Dudley continued, boldly. Harry laughed.

"Wizards are men, Dud. And no, she's not a witch." Dudley seemed to relax a bit.

"Why would a *normal* girl want to hang around with *you*?" he sneered. Harry glanced at him, sideways.

"Maybe she got a look at the competition." He smiled maliciously. "Why? You jealous?" Dudley stopped short. In the last few years, Harry had grown quite a bit, and now stood several inches taller than Dudley, who was built more like Uncle Vernon. But what Dudley lacked in height, he more than made up for in girth. He cracked his knuckles menacingly.

"It just ain't right for a *normal* girl to go around with a freak like you," he said, under his breath. Harry stopped too, and looked straight into Dudley's piggy eyes.

"Maybe you should go explain to her why I'm such a freak," he taunted. Dudley frowned. "Yeah, your mumsey and daddy would just *love* that, wouldn't they wittle Diddy Dumpkins? You, spreading around rumors to all the neighbors about my 'abnormality'..."

"Shut up!" Dudley growled, advancing on Harry. Harry took a step backwards and reached again for his wand, his fingers closing around the familiar smooth polished wood. Dudley laughed, but the laugh was forced, and his eyes were wide.

"You wouldn't be such a big man without that thing, would you? Can't stand up for yourself like a real man. You just hide behind your freak friends and your freak godfather and your -- your -- *magic!*" Harry froze. It didn't occur to him that he'd never actually heard Dudley use the word "magic" out loud before, nor did he remember that his cousin was roughly three times his size. In fact, the only thing he realized was that he hadn't thought of Sirius since he'd met Gwyn that afternoon. A sick hot rush of guilt shot through him as he lunged for his cousin. Harry threw a punch that crunched sickeningly against Dudley's nose.

"Shut up!" he screamed madly. The punch sent Dudley off balance and he fell backwards onto Mrs. Number Three's dead front lawn looking shocked. Harry threw himself on top of Dudley and started pummeling him with his fists. "Don't talk about him!" he shouted. "You don't know *anything!* You've no *right!*"

The first punch caught Dudley off guard, but only for a moment. Grunting like a wild pig, Dudley grabbed Harry and threw him off onto the lawn, and proceeded to pick himself up. Harry scrambled to his feet and noticed with some pride that Dudley's nose was beginning to bleed down the front of his tee shirt. But his moment was short lived.

Dudley lunged at Harry with a fierce growl and punched him hard in the side and then again in the jaw. Harry was blinded by white hot pain, but he managed to duck when Dudley aimed a second punch at his face. His head throbbed wildly as he flung one punch after another at Dudley, who expertly dodged each one, but Harry wasn't sure if the throbbing was due to the pain in his head, or the anger he felt at Dudley.

Again, Harry waited a second too long, and Dudley's ham-sized fist crashed into the side of his head. Harry went down onto the lawn again, white stars popping in front of his eyes. He groaned and tasted blood from a split lip. Suddenly, he realized that Dudley was leaning over him, and he rolled quickly away.

From somewhere nearby, Harry heard a shrill shriek. But it didn't matter to him. Nothing mattered to him. The voice distracted Dudley, and Harry took the opportunity to run at him, jumping on his back and knocking him to the ground. He punched Dudley hard in the ribs and heard his cousin groan. Then suddenly, Harry felt a think hand clamp around his neck. He was confused because he was still sitting on top of Dudley. The hand pushed him roughly to the ground and, fighting for air, he gratefully stayed there. He closed his eyes and wheezed through the painful throbbing in his head, neck, and side.

After a moment, he realized that there were voices all around him. He opened his eyes to see Mrs. Number Three staring down her long pointed nose at him in disapproval. He squinted at her, and then a large, red face appeared next to her. Harry groaned.

"GET UP!" Uncle Vernon roared, flecks of spittle hitting Harry in the face. Harry rolled to his side and found that getting up was a bit harder than he had expected. He felt Uncle Vernon grab him roughly by the back of his jeans and drag him to his feet. Harry squinted into the darkness and realized that the bridge of his glasses had bent, causing them to sit askew on his nose. Up and down Privet Drive, neighbors had come out of their cool houses to see what all the ruckus was about. Up ahead, Harry saw Aunt Petunia leading Dudley into the house as he held his head back and pinched his bleeding, probably broken nose. Harry smiled a bit ruefully.

"MOVE!" Uncle Vernon shouted, shoving him roughly into the street. Harry almost went head first into the pavement, but obediently regained his feet and shuffled painfully towards number four.

"Boy's a menace!" Harry heard Uncle Vernon fuming to anyone who'd listen to him. "He won't be out and about to bother you again! Don't you worry about that!"

Harry reached the door and went inside the blindingly bright entry way. Squinting painfully, he made his way to the kitchen. Aunt Petunia was moaning pitifully as she applied an ice filled towel to Dudley's nose, which was still bleeding profusely. Harry slumped into a chair on the other side of the table, took off his glasses, and closed his eyes. Everything hurt.

"Here!" Aunt Petunia hissed, throwing a cool damp cloth at him, "You're bleeding on the table!" Harry gratefully pressed the cloth against his bleeding lip and winced as he heard the front door slam.

Uncle Vernon's round face was a very unhealthy shade of purple as he stormed into the kitchen. Rivulets of sweat ran down his flushed cheeks and into his bristly mustache. He whipped a white handkerchief out of his pocket and mopped his face, angrily glaring from one boy to the other, as if debating where to begin.

"I won't have it!" he shouted at last.

"Vernon!" Aunt Petunia hissed, jumping up and shutting the kitchen window.

"He started it!" Dudley whined from behind the bloody cloth.

"*You* started it!" Harry shouted back. "You came up to *me*!" Uncle Vernon slammed his fist down onto the kitchen table rattling the entire room.

"I don't care who started it!" he shouted. "I'm going to finish it!" He turned to Harry, leaning down close.

"YOU!" he shouted, "You will stay in your room for the rest of the summer! You're not to go *near* to my son again! Do I make myself clear?" Harry glared angrily, but managed to hold his tongue and nodded.

"And YOU!" Uncle Vernon shouted, rounding on a surprised looking Dudley. "You're to *leave him alone!* Do you understand?" Dudley removed the cloth from his face, looking stunned.

"But Dad!"

"No! I won't have you giving him any excuse to-- to-- to do *you know what* to you! Clear?" Dudley nodded, looking chagrined. Aunt Petunia stood trembling behind her son, looking almost as terrified of Uncle Vernon as she was of Harry. Harry had only seen his Uncle this angry once before, when he had practically gone crazy trying to prevent Harry from getting his first Hogwarts letter.

Uncle Vernon straightened up and looked down at Harry with a menacing glint in his eye. "Go," he hissed. Harry did not need to be told twice. He stood up from the table, and wobbling slightly, made his way up the stairs to his room.

Harry slammed his door half-heartedly, most of his anger having dissolved into pain and guilt. He groaned as he gingerly lowered himself onto the edge of his bed and prodded his injured side. Nothing seemed broken. He heard footsteps outside his room, followed by the sound of the deadbolt being shot across as his door was locked. Aunt Petunia's boney hand shoved something through the cat flap fitted in his bedroom door. To his surprise, he found it was a bowl of ice, a clean towel, and a few band aids. Reluctantly, he felt somewhat grateful to his aunt, and remembered for a moment that she was his mother's sister.

After tending to his wounds as best he could, Harry lay awake for hours. It wasn't his physical pain that was keeping sleep at bay, nor the masochistic pleasure he'd felt at breaking his cousin's nose; instead, it was the sick wave of guilt he felt at having forgotten, even for a few hours, about Sirius, about Voldemort, and about his own horrible fate. He'd been trying to push it all from his mind for nearly three weeks, but somehow, actually managing it felt as though he had betrayed his godfather's memory. And for what? A girl? And a Muggle at that, he thought. Still, it was the memory of a pair of bright blue eyes framed by a shock of pink hair that finally lulled Harry to sleep.

Three days had passed and Uncle Vernon was as good as his word. Harry was let out of his room twice a day to use the bathroom, but was otherwise in solitary confinement. It actually didn't bother him all that much. He had gotten quite used to imprisonment while living with the Dursleys.

He had taken to sleeping away much of day since he had very little else to do. He'd stopped taking the Daily Prophet, convinced that anything they had to say about Voldemort would be yesterday's news and tainted with falsehoods as likely as not. Besides, he had been getting tired of seeing his own face plastered across the front page with stories extolling his "single-handed" defeat of Voldemort at the ministry, and how he was now the wizarding world's "last, best hope."

He was suddenly jarred out of a long doze by the sound of the dead bolt on his door being opened. He rolled into a sitting position, his stiff side instantly complaining with a shock of pain that made him grunt. Uncle Vernon opened the door and brusquely snapped on the overhead light, causing Harry to wince, and reach for his broken glasses. Uncle Vernon barely looked at him, but instead strode purposely over to Harry's desk. Using one finger, he shoved aside the book "Flying with the Cannons" as though it were a dead fish because the cover showed moving images of Ron's favorite quiddich team, the Chudly Cannons. He slammed something down onto the desktop and turned to Harry.

"Come here!" he commanded. Harry got up slowly and went over to the desk. Uncle Vernon yanked out the chair and motioned for Harry to sit down. He pushed a sheet of Aunt Petunia's most expensive stationary in front of Harry and handed him a pen.

"Write!" Harry didn't have to ask what he was meant to write. He took the pen and quickly scrawled a few lines.

Dear Ron,

Tell your parents that I'm fine.

Harry

"Now send it!" Uncle Vernon grumbled. Harry took the sheet over to his owl, Hedwig, who was sitting on top of her cage, and bound the letter to her leg rather more roughly than was necessary. She squawked indignantly and bit his hand less than affectionately before swooping out the window.

"We're going out," Uncle Vernon said in a monotone. "You had better still be here when we get back." He was obviously referring to Harry's many escape attempts over the past few years. Harry nodded without looking away from the window. Hedwig was already little more than a dot in the black sky.

Harry heard the door slam behind him and the lock being turned, and he found he didn't care. He didn't care about much of anything these days. What was there left to care about?

Before long, Harry saw the Dursleys leaving the house one by one. He caught a glimpse of Dudley in the orange light of the street lamps, and smiled despite himself at the two impressively bloomed black eyes above his grotesquely swollen nose. He turned away from the window as he heard the tell-tale rumble of the Dursleys' car pulling out of the drive and off into the distance.

Sullenly, he went back to bed and lay on his back, taking off his crooked glasses. He could have fixed them in an instant with a spell Hermione had taught him, but as it was, broken glasses hardly seemed worth the risk of being expelled for using magic outside of school. In the back of his head, he heard Hermione's voice in a sing-song as she recited the charm to fix his glasses in previous years. At the memory, he felt an ache inside that had nothing to do with Dudley's impressive boxing ability.

He rolled onto his side away from the window and tried to will himself back to sleep. Before long, however he heard a strange sound, like something had fallen and rolled across the floor. He sat up and looked around. Nothing seemed out of place. He heard it again. A strange thump followed by a rolling rattle. He grabbed his glasses and stared around the room. At the foot of the bed, just visible in the moonlight from the window, was a large pebble. He squatted down on the floor to pick it up, when a third pebble hit him in the back.

"Ow!" he yelped.

"Sorry!" came a distinctly female voice from outside. Harry rushed over to the window. Standing in the bushes on the edge of the Dursleys' lawn was Gwyn. She dropped a fourth pebble that she had obviously been about to hurl at his window. "This works better when the window is closed, I guess," she said with an awkward smile.

"What are you doing here?" Harry asked.

"Checking on you!" she said, stepping out into the light. "I saw your aunt and uncle leave without you, and so I took a chance." Harry didn't know what to say. Gwyn looked away and stared at her feet for a moment.

"I heard you and Dudley got into a fight," she said finally.

"Yeah..." Harry said, amazed that the gossip on Privet Drive could spread almost as fast as it did at Hogwarts. Gwyn smiled up at him.

"Well, if it's any consolation, your cousin looks a lot worse than you do." Harry smiled widely at her, but she was looking awkward again.

"I hope," she said softly, "I hope you weren't fighting about me?" Harry shook his head.

"Dudley's had it coming for years," he replied. "He just finally pissed me off enough for me to give it to him." Gwyn nodded, sagely.

"Can you come down for a while, do you think?" she asked hopefully. Harry's face fell.

"Can't. They've locked me in."

"In your own room? That's terrible! I could tell someone..." Harry shrugged and shook his head.

"It's pretty much standard for the Dursleys." Gwyn looked shocked for a minute more.

"Listen Harry, I wanted to see you to tell you that I'm leaving for London in a few days." Harry felt his stomach drop down to his feet.

"You are?" She nodded.

"My dad sent word for me yesterday. I just wanted to, I don't know, say goodbye I guess." Harry's brain began working feverishly.

"Listen, Gwyn, I think I'm going to be in London later this summer. Maybe we could, er, meet up or something?" Her face suddenly brightened.

"That's a great idea! Look, have you got a piece of paper?" Harry nodded and grabbed an extra sheet of Aunt Petunia's stationary off his desk. He folded the pen inside it and dropped it out the window. Gwyn caught it and began writing.

"This is my phone number in London," she explained. "Call me when you get there and we'll make plans!" She finished writing, folded the paper around the pen again, and tossed it back up to Harry, who snatched it out of the air. She grinned at him. "Good reflexes!"

"Thanks!" He grinned back.

"Well," she said after another moment, "I guess I'd better get going. My Aunt will have a fit if she figures out that I'm gone. See ya, Harry."

"Yeah! See ya!" Harry watched her as she jogged to the end of the street and around the corner, out of sight.

With energy he'd thought he'd long lost, Harry rushed over to his desk and pulled out a roll of parchment and his quill and ink. Without bothering to sit down, he quickly scrawled out a message:

Professor Lupin or Mad-Eye, or Mr. and Mrs. Weasely--

I am NOT FINE! The Dursleys have locked me up again! My uncle MADE me write that last letter!

I've done my time, so please GET ME OUT OF HERE!

Sincerely,

Harry

He rolled up the parchment and tied it with a bit of string. It was only then he realized that he'd have to wait at least another day for Hedwig to get back from delivering his last message to Ron.

Frustrated, but feeling more positive than he had in weeks, Harry flung himself back onto the bed and meditated happily on the prospect of meeting Gwyn in London.

CHAPTER THREE -- The Best Birthday Ever

For the sixteenth year in a row, Harry celebrated his birthday alone. Hedwig had not yet returned from delivering Ron's message more than three days before and Harry hadn't heard from anyone. When he'd woken that morning, he'd eagerly awaited the arrival of the owls he expected would show up at any minute bearing with them cards and presents from his friends, if only so he could send his plea for rescue back with one of them, but not a single owl had arrived.

The day was beginning to wane into twilight, and Harry was angrily pacing back and forth in his room. How could they all have forgotten him? Hermione always remembered his birthday, even when she was on holiday, and Ron had never failed to at least send a card, even when he didn't have the pocket money for a present. And Hagrid -- especially Hagrid! -- had never forgotten. Hagrid had given him his first real birthday present ever on his eleventh birthday: a somewhat squashed and luridly pink birthday cake. Surely he hadn't forgotten about Harry too?

Angrily, Harry kicked the leg of his desk, knowing full well that the resulting noise would annoy his aunt and uncle, but at the same time, he heard the doorbell ring. Fuming that not even his wretched family would pay attention to him, he threw himself face down onto the bed. He heard the chatter of voices coming from downstairs and wondered vaguely who it was before deciding hatefully that he didn't care.

Suddenly, however he heard something that surprised him. Outside his door, someone shot the dead bolt back and the door opened. Harry rolled over to see Uncle Vernon, looking very red-faced and flustered, standing in the doorway.

"I thought you sent them a message!" he hissed in a theatrical whisper.

"What?" Harry asked, legitimately confused. Uncle Vernon turned a deeper shade of crimson and pointed to the stairs. Baffled, Harry left his room and headed down to the parlor.

"SURPRISE!" A chorus of cheerful voices scared him and a mass of bushy brown hair attacked him as he rounded the corner.

"Hermione?" he gasped as she practically choked the life out of him with her hug.

"Happy birthday, Harry!" she squealed as she squeezed him tighter. Harry let out a yelp of pain as she squeezed his not quite healed bruises and she quickly released him, surprised. Then Ron bounded forward and clapped him jovially on the shoulders.

"Happy birthday mate!" he crowed, barely containing his excitement. "We came by car!" he hissed happily. "A Muggle car!" Harry looked around. Tonks, Professor Lupin, Fred and George, Ginny, and both of Hermione's parents were standing in the parlor beaming at him. Aunt Petunia and Dudley

were huddled in the far corner clinging to one another and eyeing their uninvited guests warily.

"Thought we'd surprise you for your birthday!" Fred cried as he and George pushed forward and pressed a large brightly wrapped package into Harry's hands.

"It's from all of us," Ginny said smiling brightly at him, "and these are from Mum and Dad." She handed him another small parcel. Professor Lupin looked happier than Harry had ever seen him as he guided Harry into the parlor and over to a seat. Harry felt like he was in some kind of a trance.

Tonks came forward and set two small packages on Harry's lap.

"Wotcher, Harry!" she beamed at him. "The pink one's from me, and the brown one is from Mad Eye. I'd be careful opening it if I were you." She winked at him. Her hair was again short and bright pink, which reminded Harry forcefully of someone else. Hermione plopped happily down onto the couch next to him, bringing him out of his little reverie.

"This one's from me!" she said, pressing a heavy, book shaped present into his hands. "And my parents brought you a cake!" Harry looked over at Mr. and Mrs. Granger who were beaming at him in a friendly way and showing him a large round birthday cake which read "Happy Birthday Harry!" in bright red across the top.

Lupin set a large round tin down at Harry's side. "From Hagrid," he said with a smile. "Some of his famous fudge, I think."

Uncle Vernon however was not looking nearly as friendly. "See here!" he said loudly and to no one in particular. "You said you were here to pick him up for the summer, so get his things and get out!" Mr. and Mrs. Granger looked slightly offended, and Tonks glared menacingly, but Professor Lupin stepped forward with a benevolent smile.

"I assure you, Mr. Dursley that we intend to do just that." Uncle Vernon looked slightly mollified until Professor Lupin added, "As soon as we're through with Harry's birthday party." He turned to smile at Aunt Petunia. "Perhaps you could help Mr. and Mrs. Granger find some plates and forks for the cake, Mrs. Dursley?" he said in his sweetest voice. All the color drained from Aunt Petunia's face as Lupin addressed her, but, apparently deciding that the Grangers looked less threatening than the robe-wearing pink-haired people assembled in her living room, she hesitantly led the way into the kitchen.

Harry had never felt as wonderful in his whole life. With Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon in the kitchen, Fred and George began extracting a room full of already inflated balloons and brightly colored streamers from their jacket pockets, much to the amazement of Dudley, who was hiding in the corner.

Still feeling a bit stunned, Harry began unwrapping his presents. He tore the garish paper off of the Weasleys' gift to reveal a handsome brown box with the words Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes Deluxe Assortment emblazoned across the lid.

"It's all the stuff we've been working on for our shop!" George said proudly.

"But be careful of the vanishing creams," Ginny whispered urgently. "The stuff they've vanished hasn't exactly turned up yet." From Hermione, he got a large and very heavy book of curses and counter curses that both Lupin and Tonks looked rather shocked to see. Harry guessed by the expressions on their faces that it probably would have belonged in the restricted section of the library at Hogwarts.

From Tonks he got a large purple crystal suspended from a long leather thong. "I picked it up in Albania," she explained. "It's supposed to make the wearer invincible." She gave him a friendly wink. Mad Eye had sent Harry a miniature version of a foe glass: a dark detector that showed you your enemies. Harry gazed intently at it, but saw only a few shadowy shapes. And the package from Mr. and Mrs. Weasley bore Mrs. Weasley's usual assortment of delicious baked treats.

At that point, Mr. and Mrs. Granger reappeared bearing trays heavily laden with thick slices of birthday cake and steaming mugs of tea. Aunt Petunia, seeming more at home in her role as hostess, made her way around the room doling out cream and sugar, and really only shuddered once when Tonks dropped her tea cup and it shattered on the hearth.

But by far, the best part of the whole evening was the look on Dudley's face. Harry caught his eye more than once as he glared out at the gathering from his corner, peering around over his hideously swollen nose, his face positively green with envy. At one point, Fred and George offered Dudley a piece of birthday cake, but Dudley silently refused, eyes wide and frightened, obviously wary of the twins from their previous encounter.

As the last crumbs of birthday cake disappeared, and the party seemed to be winding down, Lupin suggested that Harry go upstairs and get his things. Ron and Hermione offered to help him, and followed Harry as he took the stairs two at a time in his haste.

"Oh Harry!" Hermione gasped as they reached his bedroom and she saw the dead bolt and the cat flap in his door.

"Let's just get your stuff quick," Ron offered as he pushed past Hermione's horrified stare and into Harry's room, where he began throwing things into Harry's open trunk.

"Harry," Hermione said, staring at him, "what happened to your face?" Harry put his hand up to his lip. While mostly healed, a dark scab still remained over his split lip, and he realized that his glasses were still skewed at a wonky angle.

"Oh," he said, trying to sound casual, "Dudley and I had a fight." Ron whipped around.

"Did you give him that broken nose?" he demanded. When Harry nodded Ron gave out a whoop and punched the air with his fists. Hermione looked scandalized.

"He hit you?" she cried. She looked down at his side, deducing the reason for his earlier aversion to her hugs. Harry shrugged.

"I hit him first," he said. Ron cackled wickedly.

"That's brilliant!" he cried. Harry grinned.

"Ron!" Hermione admonished, beginning to look alarmingly like Mrs. Weasley before one of her tirades.

"Hurry up up there!" Tonks called from the bottom of the stairs. "It's getting late." Harry hurried over to his wardrobe and started yanking out clothes and throwing them into his trunk.

"It's nothing, Hermione," he said soothingly. "We just had a bit of a quarrel. Now are you going to help us, or are you going to give me a lecture?" Hermione sighed, but said nothing as she went over to gather up Hedwig's cage and owl treats.

Before long, the three of them had managed to get all of Harry's belongings together and carted them downstairs where the rest of the group were sitting silently in the living area, the Dursleys staring at the wizards, and the wizards staring back at the Dursleys with the Grangers looking apprehensively on. Fred and George jumped up and offered to take Harry's things out to the cars, quickly followed by Ginny and Mr. and Mrs. Granger, eagerly jingling their keys.

Professor Lupin stepped forward and offered his hand to Uncle Vernon. "Mr. Dursley, Mrs. Dursley, thank you so much for your hospitality." Uncle Vernon stared at the hand as if he thought it might explode, and when Professor Lupin offered it to Aunt Petunia, she whimpered quietly. Professor Lupin shrugged and headed out the door closely followed by Tonks. Hermione and Ron hung back and Harry faced his aunt and uncle.

"Well, bye then," Harry said awkwardly, looking at the livid face of his uncle, and the pale, frightened face of his aunt. For a moment, he almost felt sorry for them.

"One more year, boy," Uncle Vernon spat under his breath. "One more year and you're out!" Hermione looked as though she were about to say something, but Ron pushed her forcefully out the door.

"Right," Harry said angrily, all pity vanishing as quickly as it had appeared. He stormed out the door and up the walk towards the two cars parked on the street.

"Hey! Freak!" Dudley hissed at him from the bushes. Harry swung around to look at him. Dudley

grinned evilly. "Don't worry about your girlfriend. I'll look after her for you!" Harry laughed right out loud, knowing that Gwyn was already far away in London.

"You do that," he said, leaving Dudley behind.

"All right there, Harry?" Lupin asked as Harry approached the cars. Harry grinned.

"I'm great," he said with enthusiasm. Lupin smiled.

Fred and George bid Harry goodbye and then, looking to see that no one else was around, noisily disappeared. Ron, Ginny, and Tonks piled into the car with Mrs. Granger, and Hermione, Harry, and Professor Lupin rode with Mr. Granger.

"We thought your aunt and uncle would be happier if we arrived in a more traditionally Muggle way," Hermione spat venomously, glaring at the house as the cars pulled away.

Harry couldn't remember ever feeling quite as happy as he did right then as the suburbs rolled past the windows on the way to London. Before long, Hermione nodded off, lulled to sleep by the steady motion of the car, her head resting on his shoulder.

"Have a good birthday, Harry?" Lupin asked quietly.

"Yeah," Harry said with a smile. Then his smile faltered. "I just wish Sirius could have been there."

"Me too," Lupin replied.

FOUR -- Last Will and Testament

When Harry awoke the next morning, it took him a moment to remember where he was. The cold grey room was familiar, yet not familiar, as if something half remembered from a dream. Then in a rush, the happy memories of the previous night washed over him. Balloons, streamers, a real cake, presents and friends all around, the car ride back to Grimmauld Place. Harry remembered stumbling into the dark front hallway and leading a very sleepy Hermione up the stairs. He remembered the few remaining portraits glaring at him from the walls, looking spooky in the flickering light. He remembered how quiet and empty the house had seemed. He lay in bed for a few minutes staring at the ceiling, listening to Ron snoring in the bed next to him, trying to collect his thoughts.

But his thoughts were far too scattered and numerous to be collected. Part of him was excited to be away from the Dursleys and back with people he cared about and who cared about him. Another part was quietly rebelling, silently screaming inside his head that he didn't want to be back in this house where every inch of floor or wall, every portrait, every chair would remind him of his horrible mistake. Unable to reconcile his mind, Harry knew he would no longer be able to sleep, so he got up quietly, dressed, and left the room.

At first he headed down, but hearing voices from the kitchen below, he changed his mind and reversed his direction. He found his feet taking him all the way to the room at the top of the house where Sirius had spent much of his time with the stolen hippogriff Buckbeak. Figuring on paying Buckbeak a visit, Harry pushed open the door.

"Good morning Harry."

"Professor Lupin!" Lupin was standing near Buckbeak, patting the huge grey creature affectionately as the hippogriff made strange soft keening noises. The huge horse legs were tucked up underneath him, and he was lying on a palate of what might once have been a large ornate bed.

"I was just feeding our friend here," Lupin said, gesturing to a large bucket nearby with a dead ferret in the bottom. Harry tried to smile, but found he didn't have it in him. He nodded and turned to go.

"Harry," Lupin said quietly, "I was hoping for a chance to get you alone. I have some things to tell you." Lupin tossed Buckbeak the last ferret and overturned the bucket, making himself a seat. Reluctantly, Harry grabbed a crate from the corner, and sat opposite him as Buckbeak noisily

crunched the bones of his breakfast. The jovial air and happy countenance Lupin had worn last night at the party had vanished, and Harry once again found himself looking into the tired, sad, world weary face of his one time professor.

"After Arthur was injured last year on business for the Order of the Phoenix, many of us in the order decided it would be best if we all had our affairs in order," Lupin began. "Most of us took the opportunity to make out our wills and leave instructions, just in case anything was to happen." Harry felt a lump growing in his throat. He wanted to stop Lupin, to tell him he didn't want to hear, but he found that his voice had left him. He clenched his hands into two fists in his lap and stared at them, bracing himself for what he knew was about to come.

"Sirius and I had a long discussion about it at the time, and Sirius decided to leave his estate -- this house, and everything in it -- to you, Harry." A cold chill went down his back. All of this? His? He felt his stomach turn over as he thought of himself living cooped up in this big house all alone the way Sirius once had.

Lupin reached into an interior pocket of his shabby robes and drew out a roll of parchment, which he handed to Harry. Harry took it and unrolled it grudgingly. The words at the top written in fancy script read "Last Will and Testament" and at the bottom, he saw Sirius' familiar scrawled signature. Quickly he rolled the parchment back up, almost crumpling it in the process and shoved it back at Lupin, who was watching him intently.

"I don't want it," he said hoarsely. He stood up suddenly. "He doesn't owe me anything! I--" Lupin held up his hands, and took the parchment back.

"Harry! You can't legally take possession of any of it until you come of age next year anyway." Lupin stowed the parchment carefully back in his robes as he studied Harry as though he were a bomb that might explode if he made any sudden moves. "If you decide then that you still don't want it, well, we'll decide what to do with it. Until that time, Sirius named me as executor of his estate on your behalf, so you don't have to make any decisions now."

He paused and shook his head sadly. He too stood abruptly and paced away from Harry to stare out the grime covered window into the equally grimy street below. "You know, when we talked about it, I never really believed it would come to this," he said softly, almost to himself. Harry stared at the back of his head. His hair was now more grey than brown, his robes were threadbare as always, but Harry sensed a new defeat in the man: something hinted at in his stooped shoulders and his hesitating gait. "I never believed I would lose my best friend again..." he whispered, the words almost inaudible. He paused for a long moment before continuing.

"Sirius had such vitality when we were young! You don't know how strange it was to see him after Azkaban: tired, broken, his spirit gone. When I saw him that night in the shrieking shack, I hardly recognized him." He turned around to face Harry then, a small sad smile on his lips. He took a few steps towards him. "But you changed all that, Harry! You gave him a reason to keep on living. He survived those twelve long years in Azkaban on hate, but you gave him hope. When he talked about you, or spent time with you, I saw my old friend again. I could see that vitality back in his eyes, that spark of mischief and --" he faltered. "I don't know. Love I suppose, though if you'd asked me 20 years ago, I never would have said it was possible." He laughed a bit flatly. "We used to say that Sirius would never love anything more than himself, but it wasn't true, even then. He loved all of us more than himself." He sighed softly and put a hand up to his eyes and turned away from Harry. His grief was palpable. Harry fought the prickle of tears he felt behind his own eyes.

"Professor Lupin... I'm sorry," Harry whispered, burning with shame, and knowing that no words could ever be enough to convey what he was feeling. Lupin's head snapped around. His eyes no longer looked tired or sad.

"Harry!" he said loudly. "I'm not your professor any more! I haven't been for two years!" Lupin looked frustrated and almost angry. "I know I'm not your godfather -- I'm not Sirius -- and I understand why your parents didn't choose me, but that doesn't mean I didn't want the job!" He took another step towards Harry, his eyes wide and filled with some emotion Harry couldn't place. "Why can't you call me Remus?"

Harry stared at him. Frankly, the thought had never crossed his mind. At Hogwarts, conduct and protocol were strictly enforced. Lupin was his professor, his mentor, an adult and an authority figure. Of course, he was also his friend, but it had never occurred to Harry to address him as an equal. And yet, Harry realized, Lupin was right: he'd never had any trouble calling Sirius by his first

name.

"I'm sorry... Remus," he said, forcing his voice to be stronger than before. Lupin gave him a tired smile.

"I don't want you to be sorry, Harry," he said emphatically, sitting back down on his bucket. "I want you to be happy. It's all any of us wants, though we seem to be doing a rotten job of it sometimes." Harry sat back down on his crate, unsure of how to respond. He wanted to reassure Lupin that he was happy, but he feared his words would sound hollow and cheap.

Lupin reached into his pockets again and began fishing around for something. "I had this for you last night," he said, "but once we got there, I don't know... I just couldn't bring myself to give it to you in front of all those people." He drew his fist out of his pocket and, with his other hand, reached for Harry's hand.

Lupin held Harry's hand out, palm up, and dropped something cool and heavy from his own hand into it. It was a small, round, gold amulet, a little larger than a bottle cap, on a long chain. Harry turned it over and saw that there were a number of strange markings on both sides of the amulet, making concentric rings around a bright red stone in the center. He discovered that each of the separate rings turned independently of the others. He looked up at Lupin, confused, as Lupin pulled a matching amulet out from within his robes, worn on a similar chain around his neck. Then he passed Harry a small square of paper.

It was an old, tattered, stained, black and white photograph of Harry's father and his group of friends. James, Sirius, Lupin, and Peter Pettigrew stood side by side, looking a little younger than Harry, each smiling broadly and proudly holding out four matching amulets for Harry to see.

"James found the first one," Lupin began by way of explanation, "in a second hand shop in Hogsmead. The owner told him it was very old and part of some powerful charm. He probably made that up though, to be able to charge more for it, because we never could make it do anything. But we liked it all the same, so James showed up with one for each of us one day. They were like an insignia for us, for the Marauders." He paused, looking at the picture. Staring down into the young happy faces, Harry realized that Lupin was the only one of the four left. James and Sirius had been killed by Voldemort, and the Peter Pettigrew from the photograph was as good as dead, having joined Voldemort and betrayed them all.

"That one," Lupin said, pointing to the amulet in Harry's hand, "is the original that belonged to your father. We'd been talking about it for a while, and we thought, Sirius and I, that you should have it." Harry stared down at the amulet, a feeling something akin to awe rising within him. It was one thing to have photographs of his parents, and even to have his father's old invisibility cloak, but to be given something precious of his father's by one of his -- two of his best friends somehow meant a great deal more. He felt Lupin's hand rest heavily on his shoulder and he looked up. Lupin's face was quite serious, his eyes grave. "You're one of us, Harry," he whispered. "One of the Marauders. I suppose you always have been, because you are so very much your father's son, but Sirius..." He paused, a pained look on his drawn face. "Sirius wanted it to be official. And so do I."

Lupin picked the amulet up out of Harry's hand and very seriously and ceremoniously placed the chain over Harry's head. Harry felt the comfortable weight of it against his chest and ran his finger over the raised markings.

He tried to say thank you, but no words came out. Unbidden, a hot tear ran down his face. Embarrassed, he quickly tried to wipe it away, but he saw that Lupin's eyes also were glistening. Lupin grabbed Harry's shoulders and pulled him into a tight hug.

In the photograph, the four original Marauders grinned and nodded, clapping one another on the back, as they looked up at their newest inducted member.

"Watch it Ron! You're going to burn the toast!" By the time Harry and Lupin made it downstairs to the kitchen, the entire house was awake. Ginny and Hermione were supervising breakfast and, apparently, having trouble with their sous chefs. Ron was trying to make toast by sticking a piece of bread on the end of his wand and holding it in front of the fire. Tonks had bewitched a broom to sweep up a large quantity of broken crockery that Harry had no doubt was her doing. Ginny was

busy scrambling eggs and frying bacon at the stove, and Hermione was setting the table with pots of jam, lumps of butter, and pitchers of cold pumpkin juice.

"Don't just stand there laughing!" she said to Harry curtly. "You can get the silverware," she lowered her voice to a whisper, "and what's left of the plates!" She rolled her eyes and glanced at Tonks. Harry grinned despite himself and tucked the amulet inside his tee shirt before he began pulling plates and forks out of the cupboard, as Lupin went over to rescue Ron -- and his wand -- from the toast.

Amazingly, they managed to get breakfast on the table without anyone getting seriously hurt, and they all sat down to enjoy it.

"Can't wait for Mum to get back from Romania," Ron said with a mouthful of toast that was burned on one side and still soft on the other. "What with Fred and George eating nothing but cereal or beans straight from the tin, and us having to cook for ourselves, I haven't eaten properly since she left!" Ginny and Hermione glared at him. "Not that this isn't, excellent," he added quickly.

"What's she doing in Romania?" Harry asked, helping himself to more bacon.

"Well, she's trying to help Charlie recruit more members for the Order," Ginny said sagely. "Hopefully she'll be bringing some of them back with her to meet with Dumbledore."

"Is he here?" Harry asked. Tonks shook her head. Today her hair was emerald green to match the green and yellow argyle sweater vest that she wore over a pale yellow tee shirt.

"He's busy with other things, but you'll probably see him at the meeting in a few days." Harry shrugged, wondering if he really even wanted to see Dumbledore. Things had been so strained between them last year, especially after Sirius died, and Harry wasn't quite sure he was ready to face those kind old eyes again, knowing what he did now.

"By the way," Hermione asked, looking around suddenly. "Where's Kreatcher?" Harry felt his stomach clench at the thought of the traitorous house elf. Lupin shrugged.

"I expect he's gone to one of the other members of the Black family."

"But I thought he had to stay in the house!" Ron said thickly around a mouthful of toast and jam. Hermione shook her head knowledgably.

"House Elves are tied to the family, not the property Ron."

"Lucky for us," Lupin continued, "he somehow managed to take Mrs. Black's portrait with him." Ron snorted.

"Good! The two foulest things in this house should stick together!" Hermione shot him a black look.

"Potter!" came a harsh voice from the doorway. Harry jumped and turned to see Mad-Eye Moody clomping into the room on his wooden leg looking every bit as grizzled and war torn as Harry remembered. "Granger here tells me you've been injured doing a bit of Muggle fighting." Harry turned to glare at Hermione whose head was bowed very low as she absorbed herself in buttering her toast.

"Stand up so I can get a good look at you!" Moody commanded. Reluctantly, Harry pushed back from the table and stood up, a painful twinge in his side coming right on cue. Harry watched as Moody's oversized magical eye revolved independently, looking him over from top to bottom and he found himself feeling a little self-conscious under Moody's all-seeing stare. Moody made a grumbling noise and took a step closer to Harry, bending down and poking him in the side.

"Ouch!" Harry yelped.

"Just as I thought!" Moody barked. "Fractured rib." Hermione gasped, but looked quickly away from Harry's menacing glare. Moody straightened up. "Hold still, Potter."

Harry watched as Moody slowly drew his wand from its holster on his hip and aimed it at Harry. "Emendo!" Moody said jabbing the wand at Harry, and a small glob of bluish white light emerged from the tip. It flew straight to Harry, and hovered in front of his face for a minute, then began to

circle his body, starting at the top of his head, and making its way slowly down. When the light passed the scab on his lip, Harry felt a warm tingling sensation, and again even more when the light paused for a moment at the site of his fractured rib. The light circled him more quickly as it made its way down and finally dissipated when it reached his feet. His side no longer hurt at all and, putting his hand up to his lip, he found that his scab was completely healed.

"Blimey!" Ron said, sounding impressed, "What was that?"

"Healing spell," Moody replied, taking a seat at the head of the long wooden table. "It works by going over the whole body and healing whatever it can. Handy thing to know, out in the field."

"Missed his glasses though, Mad-Eye," Tonks said thoughtfully as she pointed her wand at Harry's face. His eyes widened a bit. "Oculus Repairo," she said, and Harry's glasses wiggled back into shape on his nose. He glanced around, and Hermione smiled apologetically at him.

Moody settled himself down in his chair and took out his hip flask. "Now Potter," he said firmly, "want to tell me who you were fighting with?"

Harry sat back down at the table and shoved his eggs around on his plate. "My cousin Dudley," he said, without looking up.

"Are you the one that broke his nose?" Lupin asked, trying not to look amused. Harry nodded.

"Good!" Moody barked suddenly, making everyone jump. "I always knew you could take care of yourself, Potter, wand or no wand!" Tonks rolled her eyes.

"Really!" she said, sounding exasperated. "I don't think it's anything to celebrate that Harry can beat up that fat tub of a cousin of his." Everyone laughed, except Moody. He leaned over and growled hoarsely at Harry: "Never underestimate your opponent! Constant vigilance!"

"So how was it living with Fred and George?" Harry asked. He and Ron were unpacking their trunks. Ginny was curled up on Ron's bed marking a quiz in The Quibbler, and Hermione was sitting on Harry's bed petting Crookshanks, her hairy ginger cat.

Ginny rolled her eyes. "Not as fun as it sounds," she moaned. "Imagine having to inspect your breakfast cereal every morning to be sure there isn't a bit of nosebleed nougat hiding in it!" Ron snorted.

"And once they figured out we weren't stupid enough to test their new products for them, they actually put us to work in the shop!" He looked at Harry with indignation. "Our own brothers! Can you believe it?" Harry quickly suppressed a grin and shook his head.

"At least they paid us though," Ginny said with a grin.

"Sweden was nice," Hermione volunteered. "Did you get my postcards, Harry?"

"Yeah, thanks," Harry said, closing his trunk and sitting on it. "Hey, and thanks for the party last night," he added, looking at Hermione. He suspected it might have been her idea. "It was... amazing!"

Hermione beamed at him. "Well," she said, "I didn't think you'd ever had a proper birthday party, and we all thought you could do with a little cheering up."

"Did you see old Dudley's face?" Ron laughed. "That'd cheer anyone up. He looked like he thought we might turn him into a slug or something at any moment."

"Yeah!" Harry said, relishing the memory of how good it had felt to be the center of attention at the Dursleys' for once in his life. He loved thinking of how jealous it must have made Dudley to watch him open all those presents all by himself.

--and did you see when Fred and George offered him that piece of cake?" Ron roared.

"Mind you," Ginny added, "he was smart not to take it!"

"I never really knew how awfully they treated you, Harry," Hermione said softly as the laughter died down. "I mean, I knew they were beastly to you, but I didn't know they locked you up like that!" Harry nodded, not knowing what to say.

"So why were you really fighting with Dudley, anyway?" Ron asked changing the subject. "I mean, other than the fact that he's a slimy fat git with the brains of a flobber worm..."

Harry shrugged noncommittally. "He just said some stuff to me about hiding behind my magic, and about Sirius, and making fun of this girl I met, and I guess it just finally got to me." Ron was staring at him, sitting bolt upright on the edge of his trunk.

"Girl?" he said insistently, "What girl?" Harry immediately wished he hadn't mentioned Gwyn. He felt his face getting warm as Ron and Hermione and Ginny all stared at him expectantly.

"I don't know. Just this Muggle girl I met..."

Ginny giggled. "Harry you're blushing!" Ron looked at Harry suspiciously.

"Is she pretty?" he asked.

"Well... yeah, I guess she's..."

"Well," Ginny prompted, "what's her name? What's she like?" Harry sighed.

"Her name is Gwyn," he acquiesced, "and she's from America."

"And she's a Muggle?" Ron exclaimed.

"Oh Ron!" Hermione chided. "You say that like it's a disease!" Ron frowned and ignored Hermione to look at Harry.

"Did you kiss her then?" he demanded. Harry blushed furiously again.

"What? No! Ron!" He shoved Ron hard so that he fell off his trunk onto the floor. He looked up at Hermione and Ginny, who were barely containing their giggles. "We just hung out together," he said pleadingly, "that's all! I don't even fancy her!"

Ginny rolled over on the bed in a fit of giggles, apparently not believing him one bit. Hermione was obviously trying to remain above the hysterics. She rolled her eyes at Ginny and asked loudly "What was she doing over here? Visiting relatives?"

"Her dad's a kind of ambassador," Harry shouted, trying to drown out Ginny's laughter. "They're living here in London, and she gave me her phone number so maybe I could call her..." This last was obviously too much for Hermione who cried "Oh!" and put her hands over her mouth trying to hide her grin.

"What?" Ron demanded. "What does that mean?"

"When a Muggle girl gives a boy her phone number, it means she likes him, Ron!" Hermione said, and she too dissolved into giggles. Harry could hardly stand it.

"It does?" Ron asked, confused.

"Not always!" Harry insisted.

"What does a phone number have to do with liking someone?" Ron asked, still looking very confused.

"Oh just shut up about it will you?" Harry said, looking from one face to the next. "We just hung out once or twice, OK?" He frowned menacingly at Ron who looked like he wanted to ask more questions. "Dudley thought it was really funny too, and it earned him a broken nose!"

"Sorry Harry," Hermione said, biting her lip to stop herself from giggling. "But how are you planning to call her? There's no phone in the house." To be honest, Harry had been wondering that himself ever since Gwyn had given the phone number to him.

"Well," he said slowly, "I thought I'd go out and find a pay phone." Hermione sat up suddenly and looked at him very seriously.

"I don't think that's a good idea, Harry," she said quietly. Harry frowned.

"Why not?" Hermione looked at him as if he'd just asked her the answer to one plus one.

"It isn't safe!" she cried. "You're safe when you're inside because this house probably has every protective charm ever written placed on it, but the minute you set foot outside into the street you'll be vulnerable." Harry frowned, and opened his mouth to protest, but Hermione wasn't finished.

"Haven't you noticed that everyone is taking an awful lot of trouble to keep you safe? I mean, you didn't think Lupin and Tonks and Moody are just having a nice holiday here did you? They're here to protect you, Harry! It's the reason that the Order's been holding meetings all summer, and the reason Mrs. Weasley is in Romania! It's the reason you had to go back to that awful house this summer where they lock you up and treat you like an animal!" Hermione's eyes were glistening, and her voice was beginning to sound slightly hysterical.

"I don't see what any of that has to do with me making a stupid phone call!" Harry said hotly. Hermione suddenly stood up from the bed spilling Crookshanks onto the floor.

"You may not realize it, Harry, but everybody's worried about you! Dumbledore is trying his best to protect you and keep you safe and I won't let you put yourself in danger and negate all the hard work he's done, so don't you even think about setting one foot outside this house to call that girl or I will hex you into next week!" Hermione glared at him and then defiantly turned on her heel and stormed out of the room. Ron and Harry stared at one another in shock.

"What was that all about?" Harry asked, slightly in awe. Ron shook his head.

"I don't think I'll ever understand what she's about." Ginny snapped her magazine shut in annoyance.

"You two really are as thick as you look, aren't you?" she scoffed, leaving to go comfort Hermione.

CHAPTER FIVE -- "You Don't Want to Know"

Harry and Ron spent the rest of that day and the next judiciously avoiding Hermione and Ginny who had barricaded themselves in their own room and they still showed no signs of reappearing, much to the disappointment of Ron and his stomach.

"Just because they're sore at you is no reason for them to take it out on the rest of us," Ron said grumpily as he prodded one of his knights forward to behead one of Harry's pawns. "I mean, they're going to have to eat sometime too." All he and Harry had eaten since breakfast the previous day had been sandwiches of their own making, and Ron wasn't happy about it. Harry watched the pieces of his pawn being swept unceremoniously off the board and didn't answer. Something told him there was more to Hermione's outburst than her not wanting him to sneak out to try to find a pay phone, but he just couldn't quite figure out what. Maybe Ginny was right: maybe he was as thick as he looked.

"Hello! Hello?" called a voice from downstairs.

"Dad!" Ron exclaimed. "The meeting must be about to start!" He jumped up, almost kicked over the chess board, and ran for the stairs. Harry heard the sound of other doors opening and closing in the house, and a chorus of cheerful voices greeting Mr. Weasley downstairs. Harry started to stand up, and then thought better of it. Slowly and sullenly, he started putting the wiggling chess pieces back into their box.

A year ago, he'd have been the first one downstairs, waiting for Dumbledore, demanding answers, wanting to know what had been happening. He remembered well the consternation his demands had caused between Sirius and Mrs. Weasley. Sirius had stood up for him, told them all he wasn't a child any more and that he deserved to know. If only they had listened to him!

Harry realized he had been squeezing a pawn rather hard in his fist and it was fighting and wriggling trying to get away. Quickly he shoved it into the box and threw the box under the bed. But he didn't get up. He sat on the floor listening to the commotion downstairs.

Over the summer, Ron had expressed his indignation several times that his parents weren't letting anything slip about their work for the Order this year, but Harry found he couldn't quite commiserate. After the battle at the ministry, after Sirius... Dumbledore had been forced to come clean with Harry, to tell him everything he probably should have been told long ago, and although Harry had been begging everyone for that knowledge for the better part of the past five years, he suddenly found himself wishing now that Dumbledore hadn't told him.

The truth of it was that the knowledge Dumbledore had given him -- about Voldemort, about the prophesy, about Harry's own black fate -- was eating away at him inside. Neither can live while the other survives... Harry had asked Dumbledore what it meant, but in his deepest heart he had already known. He had always known. Either he had to kill Voldemort, or Voldemort would kill him.

"Harry?" Harry jumped at the sound of his name. He had been so lost in thought that he found he was still sitting on the floor, staring off into space. Mr. Weasley was at the bedroom door, peering cautiously at Harry around the door frame. He was dressed in his mismatched wizard robes over a mildly eclectic assortment of Muggle clothes. "Can I come in?" Harry nodded quickly and stood up.

Arthur Weasley entered the bedroom and made to shut the door. "The meeting's about to start, Harry," he said slowly, "I expect you'll want to come on downstairs." Harry frowned at him, confused. Before, the adults had always shooed them firmly away from the meetings. Mr. Weasley looked uncomfortable. He walked over to Ron's bed and sat down on it heavily.

"I was hoping Dumbledore would have told you himself, but I can tell from the look on your face that he hasn't." Harry sat down on his own bed, opposite Mr. Weasley. "Dumbledore thinks you should sit in on the meetings while you're here, Harry," Mr. Weasley said finally, as if it pained him to admit it.

"Dumbledore wants me to join the Order?" Harry asked, shocked.

"No!" Mr. Weasley shook his head quickly. "No. You won't be joining -- only wizards who are of age can join -- but he thought it would be the easiest way for you to hear about what's going on. First hand, not rumors and hearsay."

"About Voldemort, you mean," Harry said woodenly. "What he's doing, and -- and all that." Mr. Weasley gave him a sideways look and nodded.

"Frankly I don't know if I agree with Dumbledore on this or not, but you are practically a man now, and if Dumbledore thinks you're ready..." Harry felt a tight knot forming in his stomach.

"He's wrong," he said suddenly. "I'm not ready! I -- I don't want to know!" He stood up and turned away from Mr. Weasley's shocked face. Harry felt the pressure that had been building in him all summer threaten to finally explode. He walked over to the wall and stared at Phineas Nigellus' blank portrait frame.

"Harry..." Mr. Weasley began, but Harry whirled around to face him.

"I already know, OK? He's killing people and cursing people and making people disappear! I already know! And I know that it's my fault!" He kicked the wall hard. "So I don't want to go to the stupid meeting and hear all about how I let Voldemort get away and so all these terrible things are happening! I just -- don't!" He turned back and saw Mr. Weasley gazing at him with such an expression of sad disbelief that Harry almost wanted to punch him the same way he'd punched Dudley.

"Harry," Mr. Weasley said quietly but firmly, "it isn't your fault that Sirius died." Harry stared at him, stunned.

"Who said anything about Sirius?" he demanded hotly.

"You did. I'm just reading between the lines. You didn't kill Sirius. Voldemort did." Mr. Weasley got up and put a hand on Harry's shoulder, looking him straight in the eye. "If I could make it go away,

Harry, I would. You're like one of my own boys to me." Harry watched Mr. Weasley's eyes suddenly turn cold and hard. "Dumbledore told us about the dreams that Voldemort was sending you," he said viciously, "the visions you had, and how some of them were real, like the one that saved my life, and some of them weren't." He tightened his grip on Harry's shoulder.

"We were the ones that neglected to give you the knowledge you needed to tell the difference between the two," he said fiercely, "so if you want to blame anyone for Sirius' death, it should be us, not yourself!" Harry stared at him. Mr. Weasley was shaking with emotion. Harry had never seen him like that before. He released Harry's shoulder, obviously trying to control himself.

"The choice is really yours, Harry," he said after a moment, the kind, fatherly voice Harry recognized returning. "But Dumbledore always has his reasons for things, and if he thinks that arming you with knowledge is the best way to keep you safe, then I know I for one will back him up." Harry stared at him, and nodded slowly. Mr. Weasley's smile returned.

"I'll just go on down then," he said, "and you come on when you're ready." Harry nodded, wondering to himself if he would ever really be ready.

"Well?" Ron exclaimed as Harry re-entered the bedroom a little more than an hour later. "What happened? What did they tell you?" Harry sunk down onto his bed next to Hermione, feeling ill. Apparently, her earlier animosity towards them had burnt itself out, or been overcome by her morbid curiosity. Ginny was perched on his trunk nearby.

"Harry's not supposed to tell us, Ron," Hermione said quietly, apparently torn between her desire to know what Harry knew, and her desire for him to follow the rules.

"Yeah, I know," Ron said eagerly, "but he's going to tell us anyway, aren't you? Say, aren't you, Harry?" Harry stared at him for a long silent minute.

"You don't want to know," he said finally, with a hollowness to his voice that even he couldn't fail to hear. Ron looked as though Harry had just slapped him across the face.

"You mean don't want to tell us, is that it?" he asked indignantly. "You like having your little secrets, like feeling like one of the adults, is that it? Lording it over us that you know stuff we don't know!"

"Ron..." Hermione started, but she was staring at Harry's face.

"No," Harry said firmly, "I mean you don't want to know! I know, and I wish I didn't." He stood up abruptly, looking down on Ron. "I didn't ask for this you know!" Ron looked somewhat shocked, but his face was turning red with anger.

"Well I am!" Ron shouted, standing up to face Harry. "I'm asking for it! I've been asking for it for ages, but will anyone listen to me? Will anyone trust me? No! He's just Ron. Just RON! Not the famous brilliant Harry Potter!" Harry felt himself shaking with rage. It was too much. It was all too much: being back in this house where everything reminded him of Sirius, finding out he was Sirius' heir, Lupin, the amulet, Mr. Weasley, and now this -- it was too much!

"Fine!" He shouted. "You think you can handle it?" His voice dropped to a deadly calm. "Fine! The dementors have left Azkaban! They're parading all over the country doing whatever Voldemort tells them too! They're attacking people! Stealing their souls!" All the blood seemed to have drained from Ron's face as he took a step away from Harry, but Harry continued his voice low and menacing. "People are disappearing every day! Madame Bones, the head of the department of magical law enforcement, disappeared two days ago. Hannah Abbott's parents both worked for the ministry and they've disappeared too!" Ron backed into his bed and sat down forcefully.

"And that's not the best bit!" Harry intoned, his voice going even deeper. "Voldemort isn't just content with England this time around! He or his death eaters have been spotted in a dozen different countries, recruiting new members! There's talk that he's joined forces with some mad dark society and that they're all becoming death eaters too." Harry took another step forward, and stared down at Ron again.

"Is that what you wanted to know, Ron?" he demanded spitefully. "Is that what you were so keen to hear? Gonna sleep better now that you're in the loop?" He straightened up. "Well that's great.

I'm glad you were so almighty prepared for that, because I sure as hell wasn't. You think it's so great being the famous brilliant Harry Potter? That's fine. You have a go at it for a while, because I'm bloody sick of it!" He turned away from Ron and found Hermione, whom he'd momentarily forgotten, sitting on his bed, hugging her knees to her chest, tears streaming down her face. She was staring at him like she wasn't really seeing him, like he was someone else. Ginny's mouth was hanging open. She too stared at him as though she didn't recognize him.

Angrily he turned and stormed out of the room. He couldn't think. He couldn't breathe. He stood outside his bedroom in the hallway for a moment fighting for breath. How could Ron be so stupid? As far as Harry was concerned, what he'd learned at the meeting of the Order of the Phoenix was old news. Par for the course. It was history repeating itself, only on a much larger scale. Voldemort was reusing all of his old tricks that had worked so well during his first rise to power, and he was extending them to reach much further.

But the thing Harry had realized at the meeting was that none of the Order members besides himself and Dumbledore knew the truth. They were all talking about ways of protecting themselves and each other, ways of keeping Harry safe until he was back at Hogwarts, and that's when he'd realized it: none of them knew that he wasn't safe, that he'd never be safe until he'd done what had to be done.

And that was the thing he so desperately wanted to tell Ron and Hermione, but just imagining the looks on their faces, the burdens they'd be forced to carry, the danger he'd be putting them in, he'd found he couldn't do it. He wouldn't do it.

Harry looked up and found himself outside Buckbeak's room. He'd gone there without even realizing it. Slowly he opened the door. From across the darkened room, Buckbeak squawked, startled by his visitor. Nervously, Harry bowed to the massive creature, and, recognizing him, the hippogriff bowed his head back at Harry.

Harry threw himself down onto the crate in the corner. He'd taken recently to wondering what things would be like if he'd never been born, or even better, if Voldemort had never existed. He tried to imagine himself living in a big white house with his mom and dad, and maybe even a brother or a sister. He tried to imagine what it would be like if his biggest worries were how many OWLs he'd received or whether or not he would win the next quiddich match. He tried to picture what it would be like if every person he met didn't stare at his scar, or whisper behind his back, or...

Harry suddenly saw a face in his mind's eye smiling warmly at him -- a face with bright blue eyes, a small turned-up nose, and a shock of pink running through long blonde hair. Harry reached into the pocket of his jeans and felt the piece of paper he'd been carrying around with him.

Before he even knew what he was doing, Harry found himself bolting down the stairs towards the front door. When he reached the first floor landing, he stopped and listened hard. From above him he could hear the muffled sound of voices from his bedroom. A small stab of guilt shot through him, but he ignored it. From below, the even quieter sound of voices wafted up, just barely audible from the kitchen. Luck was with him.

Making as little noise as possible, Harry crept quickly towards the front door. He wondered for a moment if he would be able to get out, since, as Hermione had said (another pang of guilt) the house was so thoroughly charmed, but the locks and handle turned easily and the door swung open at his touch.

Amazed at his own luck, Harry quietly closed the door and dashed down the front steps. He turned back to make sure he wasn't being followed, and to his amazement, he watched as number twelve was squeezed out of existence between numbers eleven and thirteen.

Harry looked up one way and down it the other. The shabby residential street was bathed in the eerie orange glow of a streetlight at either end, but there wasn't a phone booth to be seen. Not about to be deterred, Harry set off to the right, sure that there would be a phone booth just around the --

"Harry?!" Harry froze at the sound of Tonks' voice. It was over. He was caught. Slowly he turned around.

She was jogging up to him out of the darkness, a look of fear written across her face. "What is it?"

she cried, breathless, "What happened? What's wrong?" Harry found he couldn't answer her. Shame at his stupidity burned up inside him from his stomach, turning his face bright red. He chose to look at his feet, rather than at Tonks' unhappy face.

"What's going on?" she demanded. "What are you doing out here?"

"I... I just fancied a bit of fresh air," Harry said lamely without looking up. Tonks put her hands on her hips and stared at him, her fear quickly turning to anger.

"Come on Harry, I'm not that thick."

"I'm sorry," he said. She shook her head.

"How about the truth then? Or do I need to go fetch Moody?" Harry sighed. Feeling the blood boiling in his face, and still without looking Tonks in the eye, he quickly recapped the row with Ron and his sudden decision to leave the house. He carefully avoided mentioning the piece of paper in his pocket or his intended destination. When he finished, Tonks was silent. Uncertain of his fate at the hands of the young Auror, Harry chanced a glance up at her.

The anger had been replaced by a totally unexpected and disconcertingly wicked smile.

"And would your decision to take a night time stroll, by any chance, have anything to do with a certain Muggle?" Harry was stunned, and his face must have shown it. "You didn't think you and the Weasleys were the only ones to fish those extendable ears out of the bin after Molly chucked them, did you?" she asked. "They're bloody useful little toys." Harry didn't know what to think.

"I just wanted to talk to someone... else," he said finally, feeling overwhelmed.

"Well, why didn't you just ask?" Tonks shook her head exasperatedly. She reached into her hip front pocket and produced a handful of Muggle change and handed it to Harry. He stared at it. "There's a payphone a block in the other direction." Dumbfounded, he stared back up at her.

"I met this guy at a pub," Tonks said with a slight blush. "He's a Muggle too. You've got five minutes. That's it! Then we have to get back inside before anyone figures out you're gone and Moody uses us both for target practice!" She turned on her heel and walked up the street. Harry followed her around the corner, and saw a dingy telephone booth, just as Tonks had said. Tonks held open the door for him, and then snapped it quickly shut, retreating a few paces away once he was safely inside.

Still feeling somewhat in shock, Harry pulled the crumpled piece of paper out of his pocket, deposited the correct change and dialed.

"Hello?" Harry almost choked.

"Er... Hello? Is... Er... Gwyn there?" He felt like an idiot. He felt like a complete prat. He felt like--

"Hello?" Harry's insides melted.

"Gwyn? It's Harry!"

"Harry! Hi! I thought maybe something had happened to you!"

"No," Harry said quickly, "I just had a bit more trouble getting to a phone than I thought..."

"Oh. Well, how are you? How's your summer?" Harry frowned at the phone. He wanted to tell her everything, but he knew he couldn't.

"Kind of rubbish actually," he blurted out. "I'm staying with friends and, well, we had a bit of a row..."

The next five minutes were the fastest in his life, and as Tonks started signaling him to wind it up, he found he couldn't remember a single thing he had said.

"Well," he said, "I've gotta go. My time's almost up."

"Oh," Gwyn said. Did she sound disappointed? "Well, when can I talk to you again?"

"Um... I'm not sure. Maybe not for a while, but I'll write to you." Tonks was opening the door, holding out her hand for the phone. Gwyn laughed.

"How? You don't have my address!" Harry smiled.

"Magic! Gotta go. Bye." Tonks grabbed the phone from him and hung it up.

"Let's go!" she commanded. Harry nodded and followed her back to the place he knew number twelve to be, and obediently, it appeared. He and Tonks climbed the front steps, and Tonks tapped the door lightly four times with the tip of her wand. It swung open without a sound and they snuck inside.

Once she had closed the door quietly behind them, she rounded on him. "I realize that being 16 and being stuck in this place for the summer is total crap," she whispered, "but don't expect me to cover for you again! Your love life isn't worth risking both our necks for --" she grinned at him, "-- at least, not more than once!" He smiled thankfully and nodded. Tonks put one finger to her lips and turned to go, and in the process she bumped into the umbrella stand and sent it crashing to the floor.

"Bugger!" she cried loudly. She began trying to right the hat stand as she pointed emphatically for Harry to get upstairs. Harry stifled a laugh as he took the stairs two at a time.

Two floors below, he could hear Tonks explaining to a very unhappy sounding Moody that she'd come in from her guard duty to use the toilet. He almost laughed, but it caught in his throat as he turned to face his bedroom door. From inside, he could hear Ron's voice, but much more disconcerting, Hermione's sobs. Feeling like a total worm, he slowly opened the door.

Ron and Hermione were sitting on Harry's bed. Ron had his arm around Hermione and she had her face buried in his shoulder, obviously still crying. Harry cleared his throat and Ron shot up from the bed like something had stung him. Both boys stared guiltily across the room at each other. Seeing Harry, Hermione leapt off the bed and ran for him.

"OH HARRY!" she sobbed shrilly as she threw herself around his neck. "I thought you'd run off! I thought you'd try to sneak out!" Harry patted her awkwardly, deciding at once not to tell her that he pretty much had. "I didn't know what to do! I wanted to go tell Lupin, but then I was afraid you'd be even madder and..." She sniffled loudly and pulled back enough to look at him through puffy red eyes. "I'm so sorry I'm being s-such a prat!" she said, hiccupping slightly. "I'll try not to be so emotional all the time, I promise." She stood back and looked up at him hopefully. "I'm really sorry, OK Harry?" she said quietly.

"Of course!" he said, surprised. "I mean, I'm the one who should be apologizing!" He looked over at Ron. "I'm the one who blew up. It's just... a lot to absorb right now, you know?" Hermione nodded vigorously, looking like she might start crying again, but Harry was focused on Ron. He had a funny, slightly green look about him, but he nodded tersely.

"Lights out you lot!" called Lupin from the hallway. Hermione sniffed loudly again and headed for the door. She looked back and gave Ron a strange, searching look before saying "G'night," and disappearing out into the hallway.

Harry stared at Ron, who was staring at the door. "Are we good?" he asked, finally. Ron shook himself.

"What? Oh. Yeah. We're good. Just promise me you'll tell us stuff from now on. You don't have to protect us, you know. Anything you know, we want to know." Harry nodded, a cold pit of guilt forming in his stomach. He and Ron quickly got ready for bed, and Harry noticed that Ron kept staring at the door, and then back at Harry in an odd way. As he collapsed into his bed, he found he barely had the energy to care. It had been a long day. A very long day.

The next few weeks at Grimmauld Place were devastatingly, blindingly, mind-numbingly dull. Ginny had been so bored that she had allowed Hermione to teach her how to knit without magic, and so far they had produced three or four holey, knobby scarves between them. Ron and Harry had played so many games of wizard's chess that Harry was actually getting rather good and came quite close to beating Ron several times, much to Ron's chagrin. The cleaning that had occupied them the previous summer had, to a large extent, already been finished, and without Mrs. Weasley around to guilt or goad them, they were loath to start any new projects. Various Order members came and went, but no more meetings were called, and no one seemed particularly keen on telling Harry any more than he already knew. Frankly, that suited him fine.

A week before they were set to leave for Hogwarts, and just when Harry was beginning to favorably compare his time at the Dursleys' with his past few weeks at Grimmauld Place, Mrs. Weasley and Charlie turned up after breakfast just back from Romania. Before long the house was humming with activity. Fred and George popped over almost immediately, complaining that they hadn't had a decent meal in weeks, and bringing a box of their new "After Dinner Entertain-Mints" to barter with. Various members of the Order including Kingsley Shacklebolt and Emmeline Vance kept dropping in to say hello, ask Mrs. Weasley how her trip had been, and wonder what she had planned for dinner. So, Mrs. Weasley happily started cooking around noon and didn't finish until dinner time when the long wooden table in the kitchen was groaning from the weight of all the food and every seat was filled.

The feasting lasted for several hours and concluded with everyone sampling one of Fred and George's new mints, each of which had a different comical effect. Ron's skin turned bright purple for several minutes which clashed appallingly with his bright red hair; Mr. Weasley's voice shot up several octaves making him sound something like a hyperactive chipmunk; Ginny and Hermione both chose the same kind which made them each sprout luxuriously long and full mustaches; Charlie took one that made him bark quite convincingly like a dog, and Harry's made tiny silvery bubbles come out his nose every time he laughed.

They were all having a good laugh at Mad-Eye who had finally been persuaded to take a mint which made great quantities of yellow steam shoot from both ears, when Mrs. Weasley finally announced that it was time for bed. She shooed them all upstairs and said "And no talking either! We've got a big day tomorrow and you need your rest!" in her best motherly voice. Harry found he didn't even mind that she hugged him rather longer and more tightly than was absolutely necessary before bidding him goodnight.

The next morning, Harry stumbled downstairs to find Fred and George snoring on the couches in one of the first floor parlors and Mrs. Weasley already in the kitchen cooking.

"Morning Harry dear," she said without even looking around. "You're up early." Harry yawned in reply. Mr. Weasley suddenly came bustling down the stairs. He was dripping wet.

"Raining cats and dogs out there!" he exclaimed as he kissed his wife on the cheek. "Not a very good day for shopping!" He gave Harry a friendly pat on the shoulder as he sat down next to him and dumped an arm full of soggy Muggle newspapers onto the table. He'd taken up reading them "for research" he said, but Harry had noticed he usually only looked at the used car adverts and the funnies.

"Shopping?" Harry asked as Mrs. Weasley passed him a huge plate of eggs, tomatoes, kippers, and toast.

"Yes dear," Mrs. Weasley replied, "your Hogwarts letters arrived this morning, and Arthur and I thought you four could do with a bit of an outing." Harry looked up anxiously as Mrs. Weasley handed him a fat envelope. The letter contained the results of his fifth year OWL exams, and would tell him which NEWT level classes he'd been accepted into. Harry swallowed hard. The number of OWLs he earned would have a direct bearing on whether or not he could do the only thing he'd ever thought of doing after school, namely, become an Auror.

Before he had drummed up the courage to open his letter, Hermione and Ginny showed up, fully dressed and wide awake. Ron stumbled into the kitchen after them looking bleary eyed and cotton mouthed. He slumped over to the seat next to Harry and collapsed into it blinking and yawning exaggeratedly.

"Morning," he said hoarsely. "I'm starved." He reached over and grabbed a piece of toast off of Harry's plate. "Wazzat?" he asked gesturing to the letter with his crust.

"Hogwarts letters are here!" Mrs. Weasley said brightly, passing out the envelopes between them. Ginny and Hermione tore into theirs excitedly as they sat down opposite Harry and Ron. Ron swallowed his toast with a huge gulp. He suddenly looked much more awake as he held the fat envelope in his hands.

"I made prefect!" Ginny squealed happily waving her badge over her head.

"Oh *Ginny!*" Mrs. Weasley cooed, swooping down to hug her daughter. Mr. Weasley pounded the table happily.

"That's a full house!" he exclaimed.

"Some of us are trying to sleep!" Fred yelled from the doorway, his eyes only barely open, one sock missing. He squinted into the kitchen. "What's going on?"

"Ginny made prefect," Mrs. Weasley said, "so stop acting surly and come and congratulate her." Fred frowned as if he hadn't quite comprehended as George poked his head around the doorframe.

"Breakfast!" George exclaimed. "Excellent!"

In the commotion, Ron leaned over to Harry. "What do you reckon?" he asked, nervously eyeing his envelope.

"We'll open them together," Harry nodded. Ron bit his lip and looked solemn. As one, they tore into their envelopes, but before they had a chance to look at the contents, Hermione and Mrs. Weasley both gave a happy little shriek.

"Eleven OWLs!" Mrs. Weasley cried, hugging Hermione tightly. "ELEVEN! That must be something like a record! Fred, go and fetch Errol so Hermione can send word to her parents. Eleven!"

Harry and Ron looked at each other despairingly. Neither of them was going to earn anywhere close to eleven OWLs -- they hadn't even sat that many exams! Taking a deep breath, Harry and Ron both extracted the sheaves of parchment from their envelopes. As Harry unfolded his, something heavy fell into his lap.

"What about you, Ron?" Mrs. Weasley asked, dabbing her eyes with the corner of her apron.

"Yes Ronnie," Fred said, sliding into a seat next to him, "tell us how the ickle prefect did." Ron looked down at his letter and his ears began to turn bright red.

"Well Ron?" Mrs. Weasley prodded as silence fell over the room.

"Five," breathed Ron with relief. "Five! I got five!"

"Five!" Fred scoffed. "That's disgraceful! And you call yourself *our* brother!"

"Five OWLs is perfectly acceptable," Mrs. Weasley said rushing over to hug Ron.

"That's what I mean!" Fred said, disgusted. Mrs. Weasley shot him a venomous look before turning to Harry.

"And what about you, Harry dear?" she asked kindly. Harry hadn't been paying much attention to the ruckus around him. Instead, he had been focused on the small, heavy, scarlet and gold badge that had fallen out of his envelope and onto his lap.

"Yeah Harry," Ron said confidently, "what did you get?"

"Quiddich captain," Harry said, looking up with a dumb look on his face. For a moment everyone was silent, then Fred and George burst into war whoops and leaped from their seats.

"Brilliant!" George shouted pounding the table so hard that Ginny's toast went flying.

"Knew you had it in you!" Fred said jovially slapping Harry on the back.

"But..." Harry said confused, "I was banned! For life!" Hermione scoffed.

"By Umbridge, not by anybody who counts!" she said triumphantly. "I'm sure Dumbledore rescinded it as soon as he was back in his office."

"You can be seeker again if I can be a chaser," Ginny said with a grin.

"Gee thanks," Harry laughed.

"Oooo! Mum! Can I have a new broom like Ron's?" Ginny said suddenly hopping up from her chair. "I'm going to need one if I'm going to play chaser!"

Harry looked over at Ron who was staring at the badge.

"Well done, mate!" Ron said, a hint of awe in his voice. "I mean, we all knew it would be you once Angelina left."

"Yes, congratulations Harry!" Mrs. Weasley said. "But how many OWLs did you get?"

"Oh," Harry hadn't even bothered to look at his OWL scores yet, he'd been so absorbed with his badge. "Er... six," he said after fishing out the correct bit of parchment.

"Six?" Ron scoffed snatching the parchment. "How did you manage an E in Potions, and I only got an A?" Harry shrugged and shook his head. All he could think of was that he had gotten all the classes he needed to try for a position as an Auror -- and that he was quiddich captain!

"Well this calls for a celebration!" Mr. Weasley announced, standing up at the head of the table. "We know it's been hard on you kids being cooped up in this house all summer, so we thought we'd all go to Diagon Alley today to shop for your school supplies, let you get out and stretch your legs a bit. Moody and Lupin will be here soon, so why don't you all get your things together quick."

The result of this missive was immediate chaos. Ginny and Hermione began doing a little happy dance around George. Fred started congratulating Harry all over again and discussing training tactics, and Ron, not about to miss another meal, began shoveling food into his mouth at an alarming rate.

The upshot was that when Moody and Lupin did arrive shortly thereafter, none of them were even remotely ready to go. The twins disapparated noisily after making both Mrs. Weasley and Moody promise that they would make time to see their shop. Finally, Mrs. Weasley's impassioned shrieking got the rest of them assembled in front of the fireplace and at least mostly ready to go.

Moody went first, his head appearing above the grate again a few moments later to signal the all clear. Harry went next and was forcefully reminded how much he disliked traveling by floo powder as he coughed up a mouthful of ashes at the other end while Moody pounded him hard on the back.

Once everyone had arrived at the Leaky Cauldron, Moody led the way through the dingy pub, into the courtyard, and out into Diagon Alley where it was pouring rain. Everyone had been chatting animatedly as they moved through the pub, but a grave silence fell over them one by one as they came out into the street.

Diagon Alley looked nothing like the bustling, noisy, energetic place Harry remembered. Gone were the throngs of eager shoppers, the sellers hawking their wares, and the carts and interesting

outdoor displays of goods. In their place was a veritable ghost town. Only a handful of witches and wizards were scurrying hurriedly from shop to shop, and the only sounds were the raging storm, the clatter of doors shutting, and the occasional loud CRACK of someone apparating.

"Arthur..." Harry heard Mrs. Weasley murmur in a frightened tone.

"I expect the weather's kept everybody at home today," Mr. Weasley replied loudly in a falsely cheerful tone, but Harry didn't think it sounded as though he even believed himself. Harry had never seen Diagon Alley look this empty, especially not just before the start of a new term when all the students needed to buy books and supplies.

"Let's be quick then," Lupin muttered. Moody nodded and they strode out into the street at a brisk pace. Harry and the others followed, holding cloaks up over their heads to protect themselves from the rain, although it was a losing battle. They dashed into Flourish and Blotts first and were met by a blast of hot air. As Harry passed through the doorway, he realized that his hair and clothes, which had been soaked from the rain, were suddenly dry.

"Nice touch," Mrs. Weasley said admiringly, patting her hair, "putting a quick drying charm on the doorway! Shows customer appreciation!" Hermione brushed past Harry with the look of a hunter intent stalking on a kill, and the others hurried to get out of her way.

"Never stand between Hermione and her books!" Ron muttered. Harry and Ron made their way around the store picking up their new textbooks together, as they would have all the same classes except for Potions.

"Don't know how you managed an OWL in Potions when I didn't," Ron repeated grumpily as Harry pulled down a massive tome called simply *Advanced Potion Making*. "I mean, half the time Snape vanished your potions before they even got turned in!" Harry tried to shrug, but found it difficult to do under the weight of all his new books. He wondered why Ron was so keen on potions all of the sudden, when for the last five years he'd have done anything to skive off of it.

As they approached the counter, they could see Mrs. Weasley and Ginny already waiting, and a huge walking tower of books that was Hermione staggering towards them from the other direction. Lupin hurried up to her and took half the stack before she collapsed under the weight, but Harry didn't think he'd ever seen her look more pleased.

Trying not to expose their purchases to the elements, the motley group dashed from store to store buying ink, quills, parchment, potions ingredients, and all the other bits and bobs they would need for the next term. Harry and Ron spent a happy half-hour wandering around Quality Quiddich Supplies while Ginny was measured for her new broom and wouldn't have left even then if Mrs. Weasley hadn't removed them forcibly from the store. Ron had grown so much since the previous year that he had outgrown all of his older brothers' hand-me-down robes, even those from Bill's seventh year, so Mrs. Weasley hauled him off to the second hand shop as the rest of them dashed into a tiny, closet-sized shop with a large purple sign over the doorway which read *Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes* in fancy gold script. The six of them almost completely filled the shop from wall to wall, and they had to step carefully around each other in order to move about.

Once inside, Harry found himself in what could easily have been a miniaturized version of Zonko's joke shop in Hogsmeade. What the room lacked in size, however, it more than made up for in color. The walls were lined from floor to ceiling with shelves full of all of the trick items Fred and George had been perfecting since their school days. One whole section of shelving was dedicated to the fabulous fireworks they had set off at Hogwarts before their dramatic 'escape' the previous year. The display even had moving photos of what the impressive fireworks looked like in action, including one of a large green sparkler which wrote POO in the air over and over again.

Next to that were boxes of trick wands which turned into rubber chickens or feathers or other odd things when they were handled; invisible head hats, which vanished the wearer's head, in several fashionable colors; and large drab green boxes labeled simply "Portable Swamp."

The opposite side of the tiny space was taken up with a long glass display case filled with all of the Weasleys' comical confections. Skiving Snackboxes were stacked neatly at one end, with each of the treats that made you ill on sale separately as well; trays of After Dinner Entertain-Mints filled

out the middle with neat little signs in George's handwriting next to each variety explaining their effects; and various assorted other treats were displayed at the far end, including Canary Creams, and the notorious Ton Tongue Toffees that the twins had fed to Dudley. Fred and George's best friend, Lee Jordan was manning the counter, doling out sweets to two young boys that Harry thought he recognized as first or second years from Slytherin.

"Oh honestly," Hermione grumbled, hands on her hips, as she watched the boys leave with their treats, "I don't think they should be selling these things to first and second years..."

"Yeah," Harry agreed with a grin, "not unless they agree to give us a customer list so we'll know who not to accept sweets from!" Ginny dashed up the stairs in the back and brought down Fred and George, who were beaming with pride.

"This is a wonderful shop boys," Lupin said, shaking George's hand.

"Where's Mum?" Fred asked, looking around anxiously.

"She'll be along in a minute," Mr. Weasley assured him. Ginny squeezed through the group to stand next to Harry and Hermione.

"Mum hasn't seen the shop yet," she said under her breath.

"Is she still upset about it?" Harry asked nervously. He had given the twins the seed money they'd needed to get started on this venture, and he wasn't sure Mrs. Weasley had ever entirely forgiven him for it.

"Well," Ginny said slowly, "it's a bit hard to tell, but I hardly think she's clamoring for them to join the Ministry any more..."

Just then, the bell over the door tinkled, and everyone fell silent as Ron and Mrs. Weasley walked into the room. Ron sidled away from his mother as quickly as possible, as though he were afraid of getting caught in the crossfire. Mrs. Weasley stood staring around the tiny shop for a few moments, shaking water from her cloak distractedly. She walked up one side, looking at all the shelves, and the others made way for her.

When she reached the back, Fred and George were standing together, barely breathing as they waited for her reaction. She turned to look at them with a stern face, but suddenly her lip trembled, broke into a smile, and she grabbed them both into a bone crushing hug.

"Oh *boys!*" she cried through her tears. "You did all this yourselves? It must have taken so much hard work! I'm so *proud* of you!" It was as though the entire group took a collective sigh of relief.

"I guess Mum doesn't mind anything as long as it's hard work!" Ron said with a grin. Fred and George led their mother around the shop by the hand pointing out each thing in detail and they even took her upstairs and showed her the tiny two-room flat they occupied above the store. When she had had the grand tour, Moody announced that they needed to be moving on.

"You might put a quick drying charm on the door!" Mrs. Weasley suggested as the rest of them hustled out into the pouring rain. "It creates a feeling of customer appreciation!"

Harry glanced back at the shop window and saw Fred giving him the thumbs up as George and Lee did an excited little jig behind him. Harry smiled happily. Everything seemed to be going right for once.

A brilliant flash of lightning and a loud clap of thunder shattered Harry's thoughts. He blinked in the rain, momentarily blinded by the bright light when suddenly, Mrs. Weasley screamed. Harry tried to see what was wrong, when Lupin abruptly grabbed Harry by the shoulders and pushed him roughly to the ground where mud splattered up into his face.

"What's going on?" Harry choked.

"Stay down!" Lupin hissed. Harry ventured a glance upwards as another flash of green lightning lit up the sky and saw a massive burn mark in the wall near where he had been standing. He realized with a shock that it was not seeing lightning.

"I see him!" Moody shouted. "Arthur!"

"Get back to the Leaky Cauldron!" Mr. Weasley shouted, prying his wife's hands off of his arm. Mrs. Weasley nodded, looking terrified as she grabbed Ginny. Suddenly, Lupin was helping Harry to his feet. Ron and Hermione were emerging from behind a cart where they had obviously ducked. Through mud and rain spattered glasses, Harry saw Mrs. Weasley shepherding them back towards the Leaky Cauldron as fast as she could. Mr. Weasley was running up a side alley, presumably after Moody, but Harry had no time to look. Lupin grabbed him roughly by the shoulders and they set off at a dead run for the pub.

Inside, Mrs. Weasley was standing by the roaring fire, her face white as a sheet. It looked as though the others had already gone. Her hands were shaking as she approached them.

"Remus did you see?" Lupin shook his head as he pushed Harry towards the fire.

"Quickly Harry," he breathed, passing Harry the pot of floo powder. He took a handful and threw it into the grate, shouting "Grimmauld Place!" With a woosh of hot air and ash, he found himself standing in the fire in the basement kitchen looking into Hermione, Ron, and Ginny's anxious faces. He stepped out, and Mrs. Weasley and Lupin followed close behind him.

For a moment, they all stood silently staring at the fire, but there was no sign of Mr. Weasley or Moody. They were all covered from head to toe in mud, rain, and ash. Ginny and Mrs. Weasley seemed to have fared the best; Hermione and Ron were both plastered in muck from crouching behind the cart, and Lupin and Harry were covered in filth from having lain in the lane.

"Don't stand around catching cold and dripping all over the clean floor," Mrs. Weasley said suddenly, looking around at them all. "Hurry up and put on some dry clothes!" Reluctantly, Harry and the others filed up the stairs towards their bedrooms.

"What happened?" Ginny asked, her teeth chattering with cold as they mounted the stairs.

"I think someone was trying to curse me," Harry replied glumly as he wiped his glasses on the inside of his shirt. "I saw where the spell hit the wall." Hermione shook her head. Her expression was grave.

"It wasn't for you, Harry. I think they were aiming at Mad-Eye." Harry frowned. Hermione was right. The burn had been several feet ahead of him. If someone *had* been aiming for Harry, he or she was a terrible shot.

"A lot of prisoners escaped from Azkaban when the dementors left," Harry recalled from the Order meeting several weeks before. "Maybe one of them still has a grudge against Moody."

"That'll be it!" Ron said excitedly. "I bet it was somebody he put away years ago that's been holding onto his sanity by plotting how he would get back at Moody! Just like Sirius --" Ron cut himself off quickly and turned a wide-eyed apologetic look on Harry, who just nodded. Hermione looked somewhat unconvinced, but said nothing. Harry noted that she was quite a bit muddier than he had first realized.

"What happened to you?" he asked, gesturing to her ruined clothes. She glanced down at them with distaste.

"Ron pushed me behind that cart," she said quietly, but she didn't sound mad about it. Ron's ears began to turn red. Ginny gave a little giggle, and both Ron and Hermione gave her a death look, so Harry decided not to press the issue.

Harry and Ron left the girls at their room and quickly threw on some dry clothes before heading back down to the kitchen. Lupin had changed out of his muddy robes and was making tea. Mrs.

Weasley, however, did not seem to have moved from her spot in front of the fire and was still dripping wet. Suddenly, the flames turned green, and Mr. Weasley stepped out, soaking wet and covered in ash.

"Oh thank heavens!" Mrs. Weasley cried hurrying over to hug him. "Arthur are you all right? What happened? Where's Moody?" Mr. Weasley patted her gently and sat down heavily, taking off his glasses to clean the ash from them on his robe. Unfortunately, his robe was also covered in grime, so he only managed to smear them more.

"I'm fine. Moody's fine," he replied tersely. Lupin came over and handed him a cup of tea as Ginny and Hermione came quietly into the room behind Ron and Harry.

"Did you find him?" Lupin asked.

"We found... someone," Mr. Weasley replied taking a sip of tea. "He was dead, but Mad-Eye is certain it's the same man he saw."

"Dead?" Ron squawked. "Blimey..."

"How?" Lupin asked. Mr. Weasley looked over and shook his head.

"We're not sure. It wasn't us though. Neither of us ever said a spell. Moody took the body to Auror headquarters for analysis. Hopefully we'll be able to find out who he was and how he died."

"You didn't... recognize him, then?" Lupin asked. Mr. Weasley shook his head.

"We checked. He didn't even have the dark mark."

"Then he wasn't a Death Eater?" Hermione asked.

"We're not sure what he was," Mr. Weasley replied.

"Was he after me or Moody?" Harry asked. They all looked at him.

"We don't know," Mr. Weasley replied. "The spell was meant for Moody, but he saw it coming and ducked out of the way. It was the killing curse, but he thinks it wasn't him they were really after. We couldn't find his wand so--"

"Well!" Mrs. Weasley said suddenly, standing up. "I think that's quite enough!" Harry opened his mouth to protest, but Lupin beat him to it.

"Molly, we all know how you feel, but Harry has a right to know. Dumbledore decided--"

"Oh yes!" she interrupted. "Dumbledore decided! Without asking any of us, either!"

"And if he had," Mr. Weasley interjected, "we would have supported him." He looked his wife straight in the eye, and she stared at him, obviously surprised. Harry wondered if Mr. Weasley was thinking of their little chat several weeks ago. Mrs. Weasley opened her mouth as if to argue, but Mr. Weasley didn't give her a chance. He turned to Harry.

"We don't know for sure, but Moody reckons the man was trying to get him out of the way first before going for you." The room was silent. Harry stared at Mr. Weasley and nodded solemnly. Mrs. Weasley closed her mouth suddenly and pressed her lips into a very thin line. Hermione was biting her lip and holding Ginny's hand. Ron was frowning at the floor. But Harry wasn't surprised. It always seemed to be him.

Mrs. Weasley took a deep breath and wiped her hands carefully on her apron. "Well," she said in a disapproving tone, "if you're finished terrifying everyone by slinging baseless speculations about, Arthur, maybe you should go get out of those clothes before you catch cold. Ginny, come help me

get lunch." Mr. Weasley got up to go, his wife having effectively cut off all public discussion, but Harry noticed that Lupin followed him out of the room. There was more going on here than they were letting on, he could tell.

CHAPTER SEVEN -- Fame's Fickle Friend

A few days later, Harry looked longingly at the large banks of public telephones as he passed on the way through King's Cross Station thinking of the crumpled piece of paper he had stowed in his trunk. Even if Moody had consented to a break in the schedule -- which was about as likely as Harry spontaneously combusting -- he had no Muggle money to use in the phone. Gwyn had probably already forgotten about him anyway, he mused grumpily.

"You and I will go first, Harry," Moody growled from under the ridiculous bowler hat he wore to conceal his frightfully revolving magical eye. Harry nodded and aimed his luggage trolley at the barrier that separated platforms nine and ten. In a moment, he found himself standing on the magical platform 9 and $\frac{3}{4}$, the crimson Hogwarts Express belching steam and blowing last call.

"Geroff Mum!" Ron yelped as his mother clamped him into a bone crushing hug. Mrs. Weasley had been oddly quiet since their trip to Diagon Alley, and Harry didn't think she was particularly keen on sending her last two children off to Hogwarts. When Ron finally peeled her off of him, she rounded on Ginny.

"Harry!" Lupin pulled him aside. "Listen, I know you're probably sick of hearing it," he said with a kind smile, "but do be careful this year. It's vital that we keep you safe, so don't let the Marauders get you into any trouble." Harry smiled back and nodded, feeling the weight of the amulet against his chest. He wanted to tell Lupin not to worry about him, but he wasn't sure how to begin.

"Remus..." he said awkwardly, "I..." Lupin leaned forward and lowered his voice.

"I'm working on a way for us to be able to talk without fear of our owls getting intercepted," he said softly. "I'll let you know as soon as it's ready, but if you need me for anything before then, don't be afraid to ask!" Harry nodded solemnly.

"Save us a seat, will you Harry?" Hermione called as she and Ron and Ginny finally extricated themselves from Mrs. Weasley's iron grasp and headed for the front of the train for their prefects meeting.

He said goodbye to the Weasleys (receiving his own rib-shattering hugs), Mad-Eye, and Tonks as the train blew its final whistle. Trying to hurry, he lugged his trunk up the steps into the nearest car. Just then, the door to the next car opened, and a girl with curly blonde hair with a pink streak in it walked in. He stopped dead in his tracks. She looked up, and her amazed expression mirrored his.

"Harry?" she exclaimed, a look of absolute shock plastered across her face. "What are you doing here?"

"I was about to ask you the same thing!" he cried. "You're a witch?" She nodded vigorously.

"And you're a--" he nodded back.

"Oh my gosh!" someone shouted behind him. "I'm a wizard too! Neville, are you a wizard?" Harry turned to see Dean with a mocking look of surprise on his face. Neville smiled sheepishly. "Wow!" Dean cried. "Let's all stand around and block the corridor and see who else on this magic train is a wizard!"

"Shut up Dean!" Harry said. He frowned wondering if it was just his imagination, or if Gwyn really didn't look terribly pleased to see him.

"Do you want to find a compartment?" he asked her, motioning to the door behind her which led to the next car. She nodded her head slowly, still staring at him in an odd way.

"In here, Harry," Neville called motioning to a compartment behind him. Harry and Gwyn followed him in to the compartment.

Harry shoved his own trunk and Hedwig's cage up into the luggage compartment and then helped Gwyn with her trunk. She was also carrying a sleek black tote bag which she held in her lap carefully as she took a seat by the window. Just then, the compartment door slid open and Luna Lovegood stuck her head in.

"Hullo Harry, Neville," she said with a vague smile. "Mind if I...?" Neville shook his head, and Luna entered the compartment, taking the seat across from Gwyn by the window.

"I don't know you," she said plainly, staring at Gwyn.

"Oh!" Harry said, realizing he should make the introductions. "Guys, this is Gwyn. This is Neville. He's in Gryffindor with me, and this is Luna. She's in Ravenclaw." Neville smiled shyly and Luna just stared with her huge luminous gray eyes.

"Is Ron going to be sitting with us?" she asked dreamily, turning to Harry. Harry frowned at her.

"Er... Yeah, I expect so?" She nodded and then dug her ubiquitous copy of *The Quibbler* magazine out of her bag. Gwyn smiled, looking a bit confused. Harry plopped down into the seat next to her.

"So you're a wizard," she said, staring at Harry in a slightly odd way. "I thought you were just a normal guy." Neville gave a little laugh, and then looked embarrassed. Harry wasn't quite sure how to respond.

"Yeah," he said, "I thought you were a Muggle too."

"A what?"

"A Muggle, you know, a non-magical person." Comprehension dawned on Gwyn's face.

"Oh. A Drab. Right."

"You're American," Luna said suddenly, looking up at them and tilting her head slightly to one side.

"Um... Yeah," Gwyn replied. "I'm a transfer student."

"That's cool!" Neville said, blushing up to his ears.

"Have you ever seen Big Foot?" Luna asked. Gwyn looked rather surprised.

"Actually, you know, I haven't."

"Oh. That's a pity." Luna turned back and started looking out the window. Gwyn gave Harry a strange look, but he just rolled his eyes.

"Did you say you were in Ravenclaw house?" Gwyn asked politely.

"Oh no," Luna replied without looking away from the window. "Harry did."

"Oh," Gwyn said, obviously a little wrong footed. "Well, I'm going to be in Ravenclaw too."

"You are?" Harry asked. "How do you know?"

"It was in my letter," she replied, "with the booklists. It said they were going to put me in Ravenclaw." Harry's face fell. He had been hoping that she would be in Gryffindor.

"That's good," Neville said blushing even more as Gwyn turned to look at him. "I mean all the smart people get into Ravenclaw." He glanced over at Luna and then blushed even deeper.

"Anything from the trolley, dears?" a kindly looking fat witch asked from the doorway. Harry jumped up and practically bought her out. He heaped the bounty onto the seat next to him and offered Gwyn a Chocolate Frog.

"I owe you for the ice cream," he said and she smiled weakly. Neville grabbed a cauldron cake and a bottle of pumpkin juice. Harry glanced over at Gwyn who was staring at her Chocolate Frog card with an odd look on her face.

"They're famous witches and wizards," Neville offered. "You can collect them and trade them and stuff." Gwyn still did not look up.

"Who did you get?" Harry asked, trying to get her attention. She looked up at him, her face contorted in a strange expression.

"I got... you!" she said in a strained voice. She held up the card and Harry saw a picture of himself smiling back at him. *Harry Potter* the card read *drove back the Dark Lord at the age of one year old. Rescued the Sorcerer's Stone from the Dark Lord's followers at the age of eleven. Located Hogwarts' Chamber of Secrets at the age of twelve. Winner of the 117th Tri-Wizard Tournament at age fourteen.* Harry felt sick. He snatched it away from her, and his image waved up at him cheekily.

"Wow, Harry!" Neville breathed in awe. "I didn't know you had your own Chocolate Frog card!"

"Neither did I," Harry said bitterly.

"Is it true?" Gwyn asked.

"Of course it is," Luna said suddenly. "But it's not up to date. He also fought the Dark Lord again last year and assisted the Ministry in catching a bunch of Death Eaters. Neville and I helped." Harry found himself wishing that Luna would go back to reading her magazine.

"But Harry," Gwyn said suddenly, "this is so weird!" Harry was a bit surprised. Of all the things he'd expected her to say, "weird" was not one of them. "You're the reason I'm here! Or, the reason my dad's here at any rate. He's here as a special envoy to write a report on this Voldemort character for our government." Luna and Neville both shuddered slightly as she said the name, but she didn't seem perturbed. "I thought I'd heard your name somewhere before," she said to herself.

"He's writing a report?" Harry repeated, feeling like he was missing something. Gwyn nodded, a frown creasing her face.

"Yeah. The Warlock Senate sent him over to determine whether or not Voldemort poses as much of a threat as everyone over here seems to think he does."

"How could anyone *not* think he poses a threat?" Harry asked a little more vehemently than he intended. Gwyn shrugged defensively.

"Well, I mean, he's only one wizard. How much harm could he do?" Harry and Neville stared at her. Luna laughed, but she was reading her magazine again and not paying attention to the conversation any more.

"Well, he killed my parents for one," Harry said hotly.

"You said your parents were killed in a car crash."

"I thought you were a Muggle! What was I supposed to say?" Harry retorted. Gwyn began to look even more uncomfortable.

"Well, that's terrible, Harry. I mean, it really is, but just because some wacko gets a few other crazies to follow him doesn't mean he's an international menace."

"One of the crazies that followed him tortured my parents until they went insane," Neville said quietly. Gwyn stared at him, and for the first time, Neville didn't blush.

An awkward silence fell over the cabin as no one quite knew what to say. Harry stared from Gwyn, who was studying the bag in her lap intently, to the horrible image of himself on the Chocolate Frog card, a disgruntled feeling rising within him. A million thoughts were running through his mind at top speed: had she *really* not known who he was? Why was she acting like he'd betrayed her somehow? And worst of all, why was her father writing a *report* on Voldemort? The stupidity of it was overwhelming.

The compartment door slid noisily open. "Who knew being a prefect was so bloody dull?" Ron asked, sweeping into the room and tossing Pigwidgeon's cage up into the rack next to Hedwig. "I mean, Percy always made out like it was some big deal." He grabbed several things from Harry's stash and sat down next to Neville.

"Hello Ron," Luna said, her eyes wide.

"Er, hi Luna," Ron replied, raising his eyebrows.

"Hello!" Hermione said sliding into the compartment with Crookshanks clutched in her arms. Ginny came in after her, but there were no more seats.

"No room!" Ron said dismissively as he opened a Chocolate Frog. Ginny pulled a face at him.

"Fine! I'll just go sit with Dean." Ron choked on his chocolate as she turned and walked away. He turned as if to say something to Harry and noticed Gwyn for the first time.

"Who are you?" he asked unabashedly. Harry rolled his eyes.

"This is Gwyn," he said darkly. "This is Hermione and the prat sitting by the door is Ron."

"But, you're supposed to be a Muggle!" Ron said.

"Yeah," Gwyn replied coolly, "we've already been through that." Crookshanks seemed very interested in the bag Gwyn was holding. He was slowly making his way across Hermione's lap into Harry's, his eyes always on the black bag.

"We've heard lots about you," Hermione said with a smile as she grabbed Crookshanks by the scruff of the neck and pulled him back into her lap, but Gwyn wasn't really listening. She was again staring at the Chocolate Frog card in Harry's hand.

"Who did you get?" Ron asked standing up to sneak a look. "Blimey! Harry! Is that you?" Hermione had a look and rolled her eyes.

"Oh honestly," she sighed.

"What?" Ron asked indignantly.

"Well, it's obviously more of Fudge's campaign to deify Harry," she replied, taking a bottle of pumpkin juice. "He's been feeding stuff to the *Daily Prophet* all summer about how Harry is the world's only hope and so on." She took a large swig. "It's just a load of propaganda to make up for the exceedingly large oversight he made saying that You-Know-Who wasn't back." Harry mentally thanked her for playing it all down as though it were nothing.

"Wicked," Ron exclaimed, snatching the card from him to have a better look. "It'd be so cool to be asked to be on a Chocolate Frog card!" He passed it back to Harry.

"Well nobody asked *me* about it," Harry said defensively.

"I'm sure nobody thinks that you *asked* to be put on a Chocolate Frog card, Harry," Hermione replied kindly. There was silence in the cabin. Crookshanks was edging across Harry's lap towards the bag again. He gave him a shove and the cat jumped onto the cabin floor.

"I'll have my card back if it's all the same to you," Gwyn said suddenly, looking at Harry with her big blue eyes. They seemed to be pleading with him, and he felt his consternation melting away as he handed it back to her. Crookshanks suddenly leaped back into Harry's lap quite close to Gwyn's bag, and the bag gave out a loud hiss. Crookshanks yowled as Hermione grabbed him again. All the fur on his tail stood out like a bottle brush. Gwyn clutched the bag and started making shushing noises.

"What have you got in there?" Ron asked interestedly. "A snake?" Gwyn laughed uneasily.

"No, it's my cat, Cleopatra. She's not very good with other cats..." Harry studied the bag closely for the first time and realized that the sides were a thin mesh material. He could just make out the outline of a pair of ears, and the slightest hint of two glinting golden eyes.

"Hush Crookshanks!" Hermione scolded as the cat continued to yammer. "Oh for goodness sakes! I'm going to have to put him back in his basket. Ron could you --" In the end it took them both the better part of five minutes to wrestle Crookshanks into his basket, but once in, he quieted down, letting out only the occasional indignant meow.

The remainder of the train ride passed slowly. At one point, Malfoy and his cronies held one of Harry's Chocolate Frog cards up to the window of the compartment. The picture had been magically modified with black ink to include a noose that was slowly strangling him, a large quantity of hair sprouting from his ears, and x's over both of Harry's eyes. It looked for a moment as though Malfoy wanted to open the door and taunt Harry in person, but the sight of Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Neville all pulling out their wands must have forced him to recall a similar incident on the train home the previous summer, as he quickly moved on. It was certainly not the way Harry would have chosen to introduce Gwyn to his friends, but he supposed it could have been worse.

Once they reached Hogwarts, Harry had completely forgotten that he had been annoyed with Gwyn. Her reaction to the castle was palpable as she stared up at the many towers and turrets in awe. When Harry caught his first glimpse, he felt something begin to ease within himself. It felt good to be home.

"This is so much cooler than my school!" Gwyn said with wonder in her voice as the Thestral drawn coaches carried them up the hill towards the castle. "Ours is pretty much like a regular college, but this..." Harry found himself exceedingly glad that she didn't have to go with Hagrid to cross the lake with the first years, even if he did secretly believe that given a chance to be properly sorted, she would have been in Gryffindor.

As they made their way into the Great Hall, Ron and Hermione went ahead and took their regular seats. Harry made to sit down, and Gwyn dropped onto the bench next to him, staring at the enchanted ceiling that currently danced with millions of tiny stars.

"Ahem!" Ron said loudly. She looked around at him.

"You can't sit there!" he shouted over the din.

"Why not?" she asked.

"Because Ravenclaws sit over *there*!" Ron retorted pointing a finger at the Ravenclaw table. "Everybody sits with his own house."

"Oh," Gwyn replied. She looked at Harry, and he shrugged. "I guess I'll see you later then, Harry," she said, a slightly hurt look on her face. He watched her as she made her way over to the Ravenclaw table and sat down next to Luna near the end.

Harry rounded on Ron with a glare. "What?" Ron asked, innocently. Before Harry could answer, Professor McGonagall strode into the Great Hall leading a line of terrified looking first years up to the front of the hall where the school's ancient Sorting Hat sat on a stool. Harry watched the first years in wonder at how tiny and young they seemed. Had he really ever been that little?

During the sorting, Harry kept shooting glances over his shoulder at Gwyn, who was watching the ceremony with rapt attention. She and Luna were sitting all alone at the end of the Ravenclaw table, and Harry felt bad that the only person that Gwyn knew was "Looney" Luna Lovegood.

When the last student had been sorted into her house, Professor Dumbledore stood up to address the students. Harry nervously averted his gaze and stared instead down at his empty plate.

"I have a few start of term announcements that I wish to make. First, as I am sure you all know, we are living in dangerous and uncertain times." Harry felt his stomach clench, but he continued to stare resolutely at the table. "Lord Voldemort and his followers have become more active in the last few months," a shudder and a few gasps echoed around the hall, "and many of your parents have written to me, questioning the logic of sending their children away at such a volatile time. I will tell you now the same thing that I have told all of them: there is no safer place for you to be than at Hogwarts." Harry glanced up at Ron and Hermione who were watching Dumbledore attentively.

"That being said," Dumbledore continued, "I must encourage you not to take any foolish risks. No one is allowed to go unsupervised off school grounds, which, I'm afraid I must reiterate, includes the Dark Forest. No students are allowed out of their dormitories past curfew, and no student has any reason to be outside in the grounds after dark. These are rules for your own protection, and your professors and I expect them to be followed." Harry smiled slightly to himself, wondering how much of that speech was directed at him and Ron and Hermione.

"On a lighter note, I am pleased to announce that we have several new faces at Hogwarts this year. First, we have accepted two transfer students, both in their sixth year. I would like you to please help me welcome Gwendolyn Griffith from the Roswell Conservatory for the Magical Arts, and Philippe Fontaine from Beauxbatons Academy." Harry's head whipped up from studying the cracks in the table and snapped around as Gwyn stood up, her cheeks very red, but a bright smile on her face. He applauded her loudly and then looked around the room and spotted a tall boy with sandy blonde hair also standing up at the Hufflepuff table. Professor Dumbledore waited for the interested applause to die before continuing.

"I know that you will all make them feel at home here. I would also like you to help me welcome our new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, Professor Lindell." For the first time, Harry glanced up at the staff table. Sitting next to Professor McGonagall was a young woman with a pale face and delicate oval glasses. She had dark auburn hair that was wound neatly in a complex twist at the back of her head. Her expression was dark, and her lips were set in such a thin line that Harry wondered if she might be related to the stern Transfiguration master sitting next to her. The students again clapped politely for their new professor, but no one looked terribly thrilled.

"And now, I think I've kept you from your dinners long enough!" Dumbledore announced with a smile in his voice, and inadvertently, Harry found himself looking up at the kind old face and the knowing aged eyes. "Bon appetit!" As he said this, huge platters of food appeared all along the house tables, greeted by an appreciative rumble from the student body. Harry thought he saw Dumbledore smile at him slightly before taking his seat and asking Professor Sprout to pass him the salt.

Harry turned to stare at the monstrous pile of chops sitting before him, but found suddenly that he was no longer hungry. He wished he could feel properly angry at the old wizard sitting at the head table, but he just couldn't muster up the venom for it. When Dumbledore had brought him back to Hogwarts that fateful night, he had wanted to rage and fight, and had succeeded in destroying much of the headmaster's office, but he'd never been able to summon the same kind of rage to be directed at Dumbledore himself. It was his fault that so much of what had happened last year had happened. If he'd told Harry the truth from the beginning...

But even now, wishing he could hate the man, Harry found he couldn't. Dumbledore had spent the last five years doing everything in his power to keep Harry happy and safe, and however much he resented the time he'd spent in the dark, Harry found he wasn't much fonder of the light.

"Aren't you going to eat anything, Harry?" Hermione asked, concern etched across her face.

"Yesh ez ecc-lent," Ron sputtered around a huge mouthful of roast potatoes. Harry nodded and grabbed a chop.

"Hey Harry!" Dean slid into an empty space next to Harry with a plate full of food, followed closely by Ginny. Ron gave them both a glowering look. "Was that the new girl you were talking to on the train earlier?" Seamus and Neville turned towards Harry as well.

"Oh, yeah," Harry replied. "That's Gwyn. We met over the summer."

"She's hot!" Seamus said with a grin.

"Yeah she is!" Dean agreed. Ginny punched him in the arm.

"I'm sitting right here!" she reminded him playfully. Ron made an odd growling noise as he chewed.

"Hey," Seamus said, his eyes widening, "didn't Dumbledore say she was from Roswell?"

"Yeah," Harry replied, "that's where her school is."

"Wonder if she's seen any aliens!" Seamus gave them all a knowing look.

"Oh surely you don't believe that rubbish, Seamus!" Hermione scoffed.

"What rubbish?" Ron asked, between bites. Hermione sighed.

"An urban legend that aliens crash landed in Roswell almost fifty years ago," she said dismissively. "No one with any scientific knowledge could possibly believe it."

"Hermione," Seamus retorted, "did you believe in magic before you got your first Hogwarts letter?" Hermione's smug look slid off her face, and everyone laughed, even Harry.

When the last crumbs of pudding had disappeared from the golden plates, Ginny hopped up and started shouting "First years! Follow me please!" A little way down the table, Collin Creevy jumped up to follow her a bit belatedly, a shiny new prefects badge pinned to his robes.

"Glad we don't have to do that this year," Ron said leaning back dangerously from the table. After his fourth helping of dinner and third helping of pudding he had finally declared himself full. Hermione had declared him a bottomless pit.

As they lazily got up and began filing out of the Great Hall, Harry's mind was already wandering up the spiral staircase to his familiar four poster bed in the dormitory. Suddenly, Harry felt a hand catch his arm, and he looked over at Gwyn, who, he thought, looked very pretty in Ravenclaw blue.

"Hi," she said softly, so that only Harry could hear.

"Listen," Harry said, "I'm sorry about Ron, he's just --" She smiled.

"It's fine," she said. "It's a good idea for me to get to know my house-mates anyway. I just wanted to say goodnight." Harry felt a pleasantly warm sensation filling him.

"OK," he said stupidly, "goodnight." Gwyn grinned at him as though he'd said something funny, and hurried off to follow Luna and the other Ravenclaws towards the west wing. Harry was quite glad that his feet knew the way to Gryffindor tower and carried him there although his mind was far away. He had almost forgotten what a wonderful place Hogwarts could be. He smiled benevolently at the familiar landmarks around him: the portraits chattering animatedly at the students, Peeves hiding inside a suit of armor making rude noises as people passed, the gargoyles that marked the entrance to Dumbledore's office...

Harry's smile melted off his face. He looked at the gargoyles long and hard as he passed and tried to shake the memories from his head.

"Harry?" Hermione said quietly, putting out a hand to stop him. "Are you ok?" Ron turned back to look at him and paused.

"What is it, mate?" he asked. Harry looked at them both and wished he could tell them, but he marshaled his resolve and shook his head.

"It's nothing..." he replied vaguely.

When he and Ron and Hermione reached the portrait of the fat lady, Harry realized he didn't know the new password.

"It's *transcendental transmogrification*," Hermione said as the portrait swung out towards them revealing the entrance to Gryffindor tower.

"Oh no," Neville groaned, "I can't even *pronounce* all that!"

In the warm, familiar light of the common room, a knot of students had gathered around the notice board. Harry glanced at Hermione, wondering what the excitement was about, but she only shrugged.

"Oy! Harry!" Katie Bell came crashing over to him and swept him into a huge hug. "Why didn't you tell me?" she demanded.

"Tell you what?" Harry asked, confused. Katie gave him a look of deep disgust.

"That you made Quiddich Captain you idiot!" she shrieked, jumping up and down. "I didn't even know they'd let you back on the team!"

"Oh," Harry said with a grin, "yeah, I didn't find out until I got the letter." He paused nervously. "You're not mad are you?" Katie gave him a strange look.

"Of course not! I don't want all that responsibility -- I'm not stupid! Do Fred and George know?" she asked, glancing over at Ron. Harry nodded.

"Those *bastards!*" Katie exclaimed. Hermione stared at her, a little shocked. "I spent all that time with them and they didn't see fit to tell me?"

"Hang on!" Ron said. "When did you see Fred and George?" Katie shrugged.

"They had a big party last night at the shop," she said with a smile. "Everybody was there: Alicia and Angelina, and even Oliver showed up for a bit. It was a sort of celebration that we were going back to school -- and they weren't." Ron looked dumbfounded.

"How come we weren't invited?" he demanded. Katie ignored him. She looked at Harry, suddenly quite serious.

"It's my last year, Potter," she said, wagging a finger at him, "so you'd better make sure we win!" With that veiled threat hanging in the air, she turned and headed for her dormitory, muttering "Oh, I'm going to give them a piece of my mind!"

"So is that what everybody's gawking at?" Ron asked pointing vaguely at the cluster of first years still staring up at the notice board. He and Harry moved in for a closer look. Indeed, the quiddich roster had been posted on the notice board, with Harry listed as team captain, but next to it was a large article that had been clipped from the front page of the Daily Prophet.

"Oh no," Hermione groaned.

Harry Potter's

Top Ten Tips for Elementary Safety

The headline read. Below it, in an old picture, a much younger looking Harry was valiantly trying to hide behind the frame. Harry rushed forward, startling a few first years still gaping at the article, and tore the paper down.

"Number 10:" he read aloud, "always sleep with your wand under your pillow. Number 9: don't let strangers into your home. Are they bloody serious?" He crumpled up the paper and crammed it deep into a nearby bin. "When are they going to let up about this?" he shouted. The few remaining first years who had been watching him in awe jumped. Hermione gave them a warning look and they quickly filed off towards their dormitories.

"Isn't there something I can do about this?" Harry asked feeling frustrated. "Couldn't I write them a letter and tell them to just shut up about me?" Ron gave a little laugh.

"They'd probably publish the letter and make you out to be all noble and modest -- which we all know you aren't."

"I could sue," Harry suggested, looking over at Hermione. She gave him a sympathetic look.

"I don't think you'd have much of a libel case, Harry, considering they're only saying nice things about you now." Harry rolled his eyes. Hermione came over and patted his hand in a friendly way. "Don't worry. It'll all blow over, just like it always does." She yawned.

"Well, I'm for bed. See you guys at breakfast." She gave a little half wave and headed up the spiral stairs that led to the girls' dormitory. Harry shook his head.

"I'm going to head up to bed too," he said. "You coming?" Ron was frowning at the girls' staircase.

"Oh... Yeah..."

Harry and Ron climbed the stairs to their familiar dormitory, the door of which now said "Sixth Years." Harry was hoping to just collapse into bed, but as soon as he opened the door he knew it was not to be.

"Oy! Harry!" Seamus shouted. "How come you didn't tell us you had your own Chocolate Frog card?" Harry groaned, but Ron laughed.

"Fame is a fickle friend Harry, remember that," Ron said in a frighteningly good imitation of their erstwhile Dark Arts professor, Gilderoy Lockheart. Harry glowered as he shoved Ron into the room.

CHAPTER EIGHT -- Neville's Nightmares

Harry jolted awake and gazed around at the curtains of his four poster, wondering what had woken him. The grey light filtering through the cracks in the curtain indicated that it was just barely dawn. From somewhere to his left, he heard a moan. It sounded like Neville.

Reaching through the curtains, Harry grabbed his glasses from his bedside table and slid his feet down onto the cold floor. Quietly he got up and walked around to Neville's bed. All the boys' curtains were drawn, and from the deep breathing and heavy snores, he assumed they were all still asleep. Neville moaned again, this time mumbling something. Harry could hear him tossing and wrestling with his bed clothes. His curtains were slightly open, and Harry tilted his head to peer through the opening.

Neville's round face was covered in beads of sweat, his hair sticking to his forehead. Harry realized at once that something was wrong. "Stupefy!" Neville muttered. "No! Not you! Harry!" Harry started at hearing his own name. Neville fought against the blankets futilely and moaned again. "It's *her*!" he moaned, "It's *her*!" Harry reached out and gently shook Neville's shoulder. Neville woke with a great snort and batted Harry's hand away as he drew back in surprise.

"Wha? Harry!" he said hoarsely.

"You were having a nightmare," Harry said quietly. Neville groaned and put his hand up to his forehead as he sat up. He ran his hand through his hair making it stand completely on end.

"Sorry," he muttered. Harry shook his head dismissively.

"Are you OK?" he asked quietly. Neville looked up at him with a look of such consternation that Harry felt almost sorry he'd asked. Just then Ron snorted loudly. Neville looked around as if remembering where he was.

"Yeah Harry," he said unconvincingly. "I'm fine." Harry didn't quite know what to say. It was obvious that Neville didn't want to talk about it, but he didn't feel like he should just go back to bed. Besides, they were both wide awake now anyway.

"You want to go down and see about some breakfast?" Harry offered awkwardly. Neville gave him a grateful look.

"Yeah," he said, "that sounds good."

The two boys dressed quickly and walked silently out into the common room and through the portrait hole down towards the Great Hall. Neville walked stooped over with his hands jammed deep into his pockets. Harry was desperately curious about the dream in which he'd had a cameo, but he decided not to press the issue.

They walked into the Great Hall, and Harry marveled at how empty it was. A lone Slytherin sat at the end of his table munching on toast, and Professors Sprout and McGonagall were at the staff table having tea. Harry and Neville slid onto the bench and two plates appeared in front of them, followed by bowls of eggs and porridge and racks of toast. Harry helped himself, but Neville just stared at the food as though he'd forgotten what to do with it.

"Harry," Neville said finally, "you have nightmares sometimes, don't you? I mean, normal ones, not like... you know..." Harry nodded, not sure where Neville was headed.

"Do you ever have nightmares about what happened last year? At the Ministry I mean?" Harry stopped adding sugar to his porridge and turned to look at Neville. His face was pale and his eyes were large and wide with dark circles under them.

"All the time," he answered truthfully. "I see Hermione being cursed, I see the Death Eaters chasing us, I see Sirius..." His voice seemed to dry up as his throat constricted painfully. Neville stared down at his empty plate.

"I see Sirius too," he said. "I see him fighting with *her*..." Harry frowned, but then realization dawned on him. Neville was talking about Bellatrix Lestrange, Sirius' cousin. The one who had been fighting with him. The one who had stunned him and sent him through the veil. The one, Harry realized, who fourteen years before, had tortured Neville's parents.

"You ran after her," Neville said suddenly. "I wanted to. I wanted to go with you, but I --" Harry found he couldn't look at Neville. He wanted to tell him that he'd tried to catch her, tried to hurt her for what she'd done to Sirius, but Neville plowed on.

"Harry," he said, his voice shaking, barely above a whisper, "I wanted to h-hurt her! To k-k-kill her!" Harry looked up finally and met Neville's eyes. He'd never seen them look so hard or cold. "But I couldn't!" he said finally. He dropped his head in defeat.

"I couldn't either," Harry replied. Neville looked up at him, his eyes bright. "I tried -- for what she'd done to Sirius, but I... She said I didn't have it in me." He fought down the taste of bile in the back of his throat at the memory. For a long while, they were silent.

"I don't think I really ever hated anybody before," Neville said finally, his voice calmer, steadier than before. "But when I saw her, and I realized... I hated her." Harry nodded, slightly taken aback at the strength and tone of Neville's voice. Neville stared at his plate again, worry and consternation etched on his kind face.

"Do you think that makes me -- I don't know -- a bad person?" Harry laughed humorlessly.

"If it does mate," he replied, "then count me part of the club. I hate her too." Neville nodded.

"And Voldemort," Neville said firmly. Harry glanced over at him, slightly shocked. He'd never heard Neville say his name before. "I hate V-Voldemort too." He looked at his friend out of the corner of his eye and realized that Neville had changed a lot in the last year. Of course, they all had, but somehow he'd failed to notice the chubby boy growing taller and leaner and less awkward. His voice had changed too, not just in timber, but in its steadiness and quality. Harry was surprised to realize that the Neville sitting next to him resembled much more the focused, determined man Harry had seen glimpses of in DA meetings last year, and much less the timid bumbling boy he remembered offering to fight him their first year to prevent him from sneaking out.

A few more people had started filtering into the Great Hall by now, and a quiet chatter had grown up around them. Harry looked up and spotted Hermione hurrying towards them. Neville followed his gaze and stood up suddenly.

"I think I'll take a walk, Harry," Neville said, his eyes pleading with Harry to keep silent. Harry nodded solemnly. He wouldn't tell Neville's secret.

Hermione waved at Neville as he passed, but he barely even looked up. She slid into a seat across from Harry with a puzzled expression.

"You two are up early," she said. "Is Neville OK?" Harry nodded, stirring his porridge. "Oh, I'm so excited to get our schedules!" Hermione babbled on. "I decided to drop History of Magic, did I tell you that? I wasn't too happy about dropping anything, but I could only fit ten classes into my schedule, so..." Her voice trailed off as she realized Harry wasn't listening to her. "Harry?" "What? Oh. History of Magic, right." She smiled wanly.

"What's on your mind? You look pensive." Harry frowned.

"Have you noticed -- I think Neville's changed a lot since last year." Hermione gave a little shrug.

"We all have, Harry," she replied.

"I don't just mean, getting taller --"

"No, I know what you mean." She paused and put on a brave smile. "Face it Harry: fighting Death Eaters might be old hat for you, but it was a very new experience for the rest of us." Harry noticed Hermione's eyes looked a little bit bright.

"I should never have let you all come with me," he said, angry at himself all over again for exposing his friends to danger. Hermione gave a forced little laugh.

"Let us?" she scoffed. "You couldn't have held us back if you tried! In fact, I think I recall that you did try, rather unsuccessfully." Hermione stared down at her plate before speaking again, and when she did, her voice trembled slightly. It's not your fault, Harry. Not what happened to us or what happened to Sirius..." I won't pretend that we were prepared for what it meant to go with you, Harry. All I know is that it was the right thing to do."

Harry frowned, pushing around the lumps of his porridge with his spoon. "But it *wasn't* the right thing to do, was it? I mean, I was so convinced that I was going to save Sirius, when really..." his voice trailed off. He found that Hermione was looking at him again, solemnly.

"I know that nothing anyone says is going to change your mind, Harry, but you can't blame yourself for Sirius' death. It wouldn't do anyone any good even if it were true, which it isn't." She put her hand out across the table and took his. He met her eyes, and they shone with earnest. "I know I made some comments last year about you liking to 'play the hero,' but I don't want you to think that I regret... anything. Looking back on it, I would help you again. We all would. Because helping you, believing in you... I know it was the right thing to do, Harry." Harry didn't know what to say.

Just then Ron came into the Great Hall looking sleepy and grumpy. Hermione quickly pulled her hand back across the table away from Harry's.

"What's all this then?" he demanded as he sat down at the table. "Who thought it would be funny to go off to breakfast early without me? Ten minutes I waited for you guys!" Hermione rolled her eyes.

"Just eat your breakfast, Ron." Ron squinted at her, but started ladling porridge into his bowl. Harry was glad for the comfortable silence that followed. Hermione had given him quite a lot to think about.

As the house tables began to fill, Professor McGonagall and the other heads of houses walked up and down the tables handing out schedules. They looked very different from previous years. For one thing, the classes were all longer, and for another, none of them were denoted as "double" classes -- meaning they would be shared by another house.

"Are we just going to have all these classes to ourselves then?" Harry asked, confused. Hermione shook her head.

"After OWLs, fewer people take each class, so all four houses have the classes together."

"I've got *three* afternoons off each week!" Ron shouted triumphantly. He glanced over at Harry's schedule. "What about you?"

"I've got Friday afternoons off," Harry replied. "The other days I'm in Potions." Ron said nothing. "Hey, I've got Occlumency too!" Hermione took his schedule and looked it over.

"It doesn't say with whom," she noticed. "I wonder if Snape --"

"No way," Harry said fiercely. "If Dumbledore thinks I'm going back to Snape for Occlumency lessons, he needs to think again."

"Occlumens are really rare, Harry," Hermione chided. "It's not as though he could just get anybody to teach you."

"Then he can do it himself," Harry replied with a shrug. "Because I'm not going back to Snape. Ever." Hermione frowned, but didn't immediately reply.

"Well," she said finally, "we'd better get going if we want to make it out to Herbology on time..." Her voice trailed off as she gazed out across the Great Hall. "Come to think of it," she said abruptly, "it looks like it might rain, so I think I'll go get my cloak. Ron, why don't you walk with me?" Ron looked up, surprised.

"Er... Yeah, OK," he replied, blushing inexplicably as he grabbed a couple of pieces of toast and shoved them in his pocket.

"Well, I'll come --" Harry began.

"That's OK Harry!" Hermione said quickly as she hurried away. "We'll just see you in Herbology!" Harry frowned after them, wondering why Hermione was suddenly so keen to--

"Morning Harry," came a hesitantly cheerful voice. Comprehension and appreciation dawned on him as he turned to see Gwyn walking over from the Ravenclaw table. He silently blessed Hermione's sense of timing as Gwyn dropped down onto the bench next to him.

"Hi," he said, grinning like an idiot.

"So, what classes do you have today?" Gwyn asked, pointing at his schedule.

"Er... Herbology, Charms, and -- ugh -- Potions," he replied pulling a face. Gwyn expression turned to outright relief.

"Oh thank *gawd!*" she exclaimed seriously. "I was afraid I was going to spend the whole day looking for my classes instead of attending them. This place is insane. Someone really ought to make a map..." Harry grinned broadly. Life was suddenly very funny.

"Yeah!" he replied enthusiastically. "Well, come on then, I'll show you how to get to the greenhouses."

They crossed the Great Hall together, and Harry could feel many pairs of eyes on them, but for once, he didn't think people were staring just at him. They went through the huge main doors and out into the grounds. Hermione had been right: the sky was slate gray and big drops of rain were falling intermittently all around.

Harry led the way around to the left and down the hill towards the Dark Forrest, pointing things out as they went. "That's the Whomping Willow. Nearly killed me and Ron our second year when we crashed his dad's car into it... And there's Hagrid's hut! He's our Care of Magical Creatures teacher."

"Is he the, uh, really *big* guy that said hello to you at the train station?" Gwyn asked, a little apprehensively.

"Oh yeah," Harry said with a chuckle. "But don't worry; he's harmless. Mostly..." As they made their way to the greenhouses, Harry caught sight of a knot of sixth years all at the doorway to greenhouse three. Hannah Abbot and Ernie Macmillan were standing off to one side, and Harry was surprised to see them holding hands. And then, to his horror, Harry saw Draco Malfoy and his thugs Crabbe and Goyle advancing on Neville. Harry quickened his stride and without explaining, left Gwyn far behind.

"I heard my Aunt Bella took quite an *interest* in you," Malfoy was saying as Harry approached. "Seems she saw quite a family resemblance -- something in the way you *twitched* and *screamed...*" Neville's face was unhealthily red as he glared at Malfoy, his wand clutched tightly in his fist at his side

"Tired of picking fights with me already, Malfoy?" Harry shouted, trying to draw attention away from Neville. "Or are you just tired of losing?" Malfoy whirled around and Crabbe and Goyle took a step towards him, menacingly.

"Ah," Malfoy said smoothly, running his hand through his white blonde hair, "the great Harry Potter arrives. Have they added 'Longbottom's Body Guard' to your Chocolate Frog card yet? Only a matter of time, I suppose..." Harry reached Neville and gave him a meaningful look, but Neville shook his head.

"He's gone too far, Harry," he muttered darkly.

"All right there, Harry? Neville?" Ron called, hurrying across the grass with Hermione in his wake. His face was flushed and his wand was drawn.

"Oh look, Potter," Malfoy sneered. "The cavalry's arrived. Too bad your army's made up of Mudbloods and weasels." Unexpectedly, Malfoy's vicious snarl turned into an oily smile as he looked at something over Harry's shoulder.

"Gwendolyn!" he drawled smoothly, walking up to her. "We meet again!" He took her hand in his own and kissed it.

"Hello, Draco," Gwyn said. Harry, Neville, and Ron all turned to stare at her, and Harry felt his blood begin to boil. He made to step forward, and this time it was Neville who held *him* back.

"Tell me," Malfoy continued in his buttery slick voice, "has Potter been bothering you?" Gwyn smiled slightly.

"Not at all," she replied. "Actually, he was just showing me to class." Malfoy shot Harry a very black look.

"Had I but known," he intoned obsequiously, "I would have offered to escort you myself. You see, I was hoping to renew our acquaintance. Your father whisked you off so quickly that I didn't get a chance to thank you properly for the dance we shared." Harry's stomach churned. *Dance?* he wondered wildly, *What dance?*

Just then, Professor Sprout came bustling around the corner jingling a fat ring of keys.

"Sorry I'm late," she said brightly. "In you go now, we've got lots to do!"

"Saved by the bell, Potter," Malfoy smirked as he pushed past Harry and Neville, Gwyn's arm looped through his. He walked to the greenhouse door and held it open, smiling at Gwyn. Gwyn glanced over at Harry, but he just stared at her, feeling betrayed and confused, so she walked past him into the greenhouse.

Harry looked over at Neville who was still blinking rapidly and gripping his wand rather tightly. "You know, Harry," he said in an eerily calm voice, "I think I hate him, too." Harry frowned blackly.

"You and me both, mate!" he growled. They were the last ones into the greenhouse. Inside, the air was warm and damp and smelled strongly of earth and dragon manure, Professor Sprout's preferred brand of fertilizer. The rain which had been threatening decided to fall with earnest, and the fat drops began to drum rhythmically on the glass roof.

"Partner up please!" Professor Sprout commanded merrily. "We've miles to go today, so be quick!" Gwyn made to move towards Harry, but Harry quickly sat down at a potting table with Neville. Gwyn looked at him confusedly as she was forced to partner up with Malfoy.

"Harry," Neville said quietly as Professor Sprout started lecturing, "when are you going to start up the DA meetings again?" Harry shrugged. He hadn't really given it much thought.

"But, you are going to do it again, aren't you?" Neville pleaded softly. "Harry?" Harry looked at him, seeing that the cold hard edge to his stare had returned. "I need you to teach me how to fight."

Harry strode quickly out of the greenhouse and into the rain as soon as Professor Sprout had dismissed them, with Ron and Hermione struggling to keep up.

"You can't be *that* eager to get to Charms..." Ron said as he dropped his book bag in the mud and struggled to pick it up. "What's the rush?" Hermione was holding her robes protectively over her own book bag when she caught up.

"What do you think, Ron?" Hermione asked scathingly as she gestured over her shoulder to the greenhouses, where Malfoy was once again holding the door for Gwyn. Harry clenched his fists. Just then, however, Gwyn broke away from Malfoy and came running towards them.

"Harry!" she called. "Harry, wait!" Harry turned and started back up the hill without Ron and Hermione. He could hear her jogging up behind him. She was gaining on him. Half of him wanted to break into a run, and the other half wanted to stop and talk to her. Luckily, he didn't have to decide.

"Harry!" she cried, catching up to him. She pushed him hard in the arm and sent him staggering off balance. "Didn't you hear me shrieking my head off back there for you to wait?" He glowered at her. Her hair was beginning to drip with the rain and her fierce blue eyes were trained on him with a mix of anger and confusion.

"Yeah, I heard," he replied tersely. "I also heard Draco Malfoy talking to you like he was your best friend. In case you hadn't picked up on it, Malfoy and I don't really get along." Gwyn glared back at him.

"Well, maybe you were busy being too much of an ass to notice, but Draco Malfoy and I don't really *get along* either!" Harry frowned at her. Ron and Hermione came trudging up the hill behind them.

"That's not what it looked like from where I was standing!" Harry retorted.

"I don't care what it looked like!" Gwyn shouted. "Do you think I like having him drool all over my hand and make creepy remarks all the time? It's revolting! I think Draco is about the smarmiest guy I've ever met! I can't stand him!"

"Well neither can I!" Harry shouted back. Gwyn gave him an exasperated smile.

"Then what the hell are we fighting about?" she asked. Harry frowned.

"How do you even know Malfoy?" Hermione asked cautiously. Gwyn turned to look at her, wiping strands of wet hair from her eyes.

"We met at some gawd awful Ministry function my father dragged me to a few weeks ago." She turned back to Harry. "One of the hazards of being the daughter of a diplomat is that I have to make nice with all of Daddy's important friends. Unfortunately for me, that meant I had the dubious pleasure of being introduced to the only other person my age there: Draco Malfoy."

"And you had to dance with him?" Ron asked, making a disgusted face. Gwyn nodded, still looking at Harry.

"That doesn't mean you have to be nice to him now!" Harry retorted. Gwyn put her hands on her hips.

"Apparently you weren't paying attention, Harry, or does dumping a load of dragon dung in someone's book bag pass for nice around here?" Ron snorted loudly and then attempted not to look amused. Harry continued to glare. He wasn't sure what to think.

"What can I do to convince you?" Gwyn asked with a little laugh. "Do you want me to go beat the crap out of him?" She looked at him anxiously. "Because I would do that for you," she added with a mock sincere nod. Harry's expression relaxed and Hermione gave them a little smile.

"Come on," she said, making her way up the hill again, "Let's go inside where it's dry! We'll show you where the charms classroom is."

CHAPTER NINE -- Charming

"Congratulations, all of you, for earning an O.W.L. in charms!" Professor Flitwick squeaked. He was perched precariously atop his traditional stack of books which was the only way he was able to see over his desk. "This year we will be attempting illusions and conjuring: two much more advanced forms of charms. Creating illusions and conjuring things are very closely related, and the one forms the basis of the other."

Down the row to Harry's right, Hermione was scribbling rapidly as Flitwick spoke. Between them, Ron was frowning at Hermione's notes, as if trying to determine what she thought was already so critical. Neville sat on the other side of Hermione looking like he wasn't quite sure he was in the right class.

To Harry's left, however, Gwyn didn't seem to be paying much attention to Flitwick at all. She had pulled out a spiral bound notebook in which she was now carefully doodling.

"Illusions," Flitwick continued, "require a great deal of concentration and energy on the part of the wizard. Thus, it follows that the illusion that you produce will only be as strong or as realistic as you make it." Harry turned his head slowly and -- he hoped -- inconspicuously to try to get a better look at what she was drawing, but all he could make out were a bunch of dots and squiggly lines. He glanced up at her; her expression was set in concentration, a single tendril of pink hair hanging loose in her eyes. She reached up to brush it behind her ear and--

"Please begin!" Flitwick said suddenly, and a flurry of movement alerted Harry that the lecture was over. He realized that he had missed most of it.

"What are we supposed to be beginning?" Harry asked Ron quietly as he drew out his wand. Hermione gave him an exasperated look.

"We're supposed to be trying to make an illusion of a Galleon," she replied, stacking her notes neatly. Harry wanted to ask exactly how they were supposed to go about that, but the telling off he would receive for not paying attention in class hardly seemed worth the information. He would just watch and see what Hermione did.

Gwyn, completely absorbed in her doodling, had not yet looked up. Still curious to see what she was working on, Harry turned to have another look, and this time, she caught him. She blushed slightly and moved her arm to cover what she'd been working on.

"Er... Do you have any idea what we're supposed to be doing?" Harry asked quietly, trying to cover for his curiosity.

"*Illudere!*" Hermione said suddenly. Harry turned back to look at her. Her face was scrunched up in concentration as she pointed her wand at the desk in front of her. At first nothing happened. Her frown deepened and suddenly, a very faint outline of a gold disc appeared. It didn't look much like a Galleon, Harry thought, but at least it was the right size and color.

"Oh well done! Well done, Miss Granger! See here!" Professor Flitwick drew everyone's attention to Hermione's very faint illusion. Her wand hand was beginning to shake. Suddenly, she let out the breath she had been holding, and the disc disappeared. "Very good for a first try!" Professor Flitwick said happily. "You see, it isn't as easy as it looks. Five points to Gryffindor. Anyone else want to have a go?" His eyes passed Ron, who shook his head violently, and landed on Harry who gave him a somewhat panicked look.

"I will," Gwyn offered suddenly. She took out her wand which was quite long and almost white and held it out over her desk. She gave a tiny frown and then said, "*Illudere.*" A perfectly formed Galleon popped into existence on her desk. It even had all the markings of a real Galleon. Professor Flitwick began clapping wildly, and the rest of the class followed, impressed.

"Excellent! Excellent!" he squeaked rapturously. "Ten points to Ravenclaw, Miss Griffiths!" Gwyn looked up and smiled, and still her Galleon did not disappear. Harry grinned at her broadly. He turned back to Ron and Hermione. Ron was clapping enthusiastically, but Hermione looked as though someone had just told her all her classes had been cancelled. Seeing Harry looking at her,

she turned red and quickly began trying to produce another Galleon. Gwyn gave a little wave of her wand as Professor Flitwick moved away and her Galleon disappeared.

"That was brilliant!" Harry exclaimed. "How did you know what to do?" Gwyn smiled sheepishly. She leaned over to Harry.

"We did illusions last year," she whispered in his ear. She gave a little shrug and went back to her doodles.

"Look at her!" Ron muttered to Harry out of the side of his mouth. Hermione was concentrating so hard on her, now admittedly more solid looking but no more detailed Galleon, that she was shaking all over. "She's going to pull a muscle!" Ron hissed. Harry tried not to laugh.

"She's trying too hard," Gwyn said quietly, so that only Harry could hear. He turned to look at her.

"What?"

"She's trying too hard. She's too worried about the energy aspect of it. A simple illusion doesn't need any more energy than any other kind of spell." She paused, noticing Harry's rapt attention to her. "I'm being a know-it-all," she said, blushing.

"No!" Harry insisted. "Go on."

"Well," she said, suddenly sounding unsure of herself, "the trick -- for me anyway -- is really just being able to concentrate on two things at once: an image of the illusion you're trying to produce, and the charm itself. At least, that's what our teacher taught us."

"That makes sense," Ron said. Harry didn't realize he'd been listening; apparently neither did Gwyn, and she blushed even more deeply. Harry took out his wand. He tried to do what she had said; first he pictured a Galleon in as much detail as he could, then, trying to hold onto that picture, he concentrated on the charm.

"*Illudere*," he said. At first, he didn't think anything was going to happen, but then very slowly, a shape began to appear. It wasn't nearly as detailed as Gwyn's, and he could still see the desk through it, but it did eventually very much resemble a Galleon.

"Good work Mr. Potter!" Professor Flitwick said. His voice startled Harry, and, his concentration broken, the Galleon disappeared. "But then," Flitwick added with a smile, "I expected you might have a talent for illusions." Harry gave him a questioning look and Flitwick giggled.

"Well! Everyone knows you can produce quite an impressive Patronus," he said. "The Patronus spell is based in part on an illusion spell! If you can master that, you can certainly master simple illusions. Ten points to Gryffindor." Harry beamed.

"You can do a Patronus charm?" Gwyn asked as Flitwick moved away.

"Oh, yeah," Harry replied, feeling that the Galleon was more to celebrate than the Patronus which he'd been conjuring for almost three years.

"But Harry," Gwyn persisted, "that's very advanced magic! I mean, that's not even required for advanced placement tests in the last year at my old school!" Harry shrugged.

"Well, it's pretty much required when you've got a Dementor problem," he countered. Before Gwyn could say anything in reply, however, Ron suddenly said "*Illudere!*" and he too was able to produce something which vaguely resembled a Galleon.

"It worked!" he cried, breaking the spell. Harry and Gwyn smiled at him, but then Harry noticed Hermione who was still screwing up her face like she was trying to see something very far away.

"Not like that!" Ron tutted officially. He proceeded to tell Hermione what she was doing wrong. She didn't look like she believed him, and only after Ron had succeeded in helping Neville produce something that looked vaguely like a Galleon, did Hermione finally listen. By the end of the lesson, she was able to produce a coin that was almost as good as Gwyn's, but she didn't seem very happy about it.

By the time they reached the Great Hall, it was apparent that Hermione was in no better mood. As soon as Gwyn bid them goodbye to go sit at the Ravenclaw table, Hermione slid into a seat and disappeared behind her charms book, grunting and muttering occasionally, and barely even surfacing long enough to snatch an apple from the bowl on the table. When Ron asked her to pass the pumpkin juice, she gave him such an nasty glare that he slid several inches away so as not to disturb her again.

After lunch, Harry and Hermione bid farewell to a rather smug looking Ron and agreed to show Gwyn to the Potions classroom. Harry made the journey down the corridor to the Potions dungeon with some small trepidation. He was loath to once again lay eyes on Professor Snape, who hated Harry almost as much as Harry hated him, yet he knew that his marks in potions from here on would be the biggest thing standing between himself and a career as an Auror.

As they walked, Gwyn glanced around uneasily at the torches in brackets on the damp stone walls and shivered.

"Don't you people believe in electricity?" she asked. Hermione rounded on her.

"Muggle inventions like electricity don't work at Hogwarts," she said knowledgably, "because there's too much magic and--"

"It makes things go all wonky," Gwyn finished with a sigh. "I've heard about things like that. It's very different at home. Wizards use lots of Muggle inventions, like phones and electricity."

"Why would wizards want to use Muggle inventions when they have magic to do things?" Hermione asked, in what Harry thought was a rather snooty tone.

Gwyn shrugged. "It's partly to blend in, I guess. And besides, just because something is magic, doesn't mean it's better." Hermione looked as though she might be willing to get into a lengthy debate with Gwyn on that subject, but thankfully they reached the classroom and she held her tongue.

As they entered the dungeon, Harry was shocked to see how few people there were. Padma Patil was sitting with Justin Finch-Fletchly and a Ravenclaw boy that Harry didn't know. Padma smiled and gave a friendly wave to Gwyn as she entered. A small knot of Slytherins dominated the room including, to Harry's chagrin, Draco Malfoy and Pansy Parkinson. Harry, Hermione, and Gwyn took seats near the Ravenclaws just as Professor Snape glided soundlessly into the room like a Dementor, shutting the door behind him.

"This is N.E.W.T. level potions," Snape drawled in his low menacing voice. He glared down his beak-like nose directly at Harry. "And while most of you are here because you have displayed a certain aptitude for the delicate art of potion brewing, *others*," he sneered at Harry, "seem to have charmed their way in with dumb luck and on no merit of their own." Harry frowned, but continued to meet Snape's icy stare. Snape's voice dropped even further to a low growl. "Be forewarned that I will accept nothing less than exceptional work from each and every one of you, and that at the first sign of falling behind, I will remove you from this class *permanently*." Harry glared back up at him defiantly. He wasn't about to be bullied on only his first day back.

Suddenly, the door to the classroom banged open. Snape whirled around to stare at the intruder, and Harry recognized the fair-haired Beauxbatons boy who had stood up at the welcoming feast. He walked casually into the room and stopped in front of Professor Snape.

"Fontaine is it?" Snape demanded. The boy nodded and Snape's lip curled into a repulsive smile. "You are late. I do not accept tardiness. Five points from Hufflepuff and if you choose to arrive late again, it will be detention." The Hufflepuff boy stared at Snape for a moment and then nodded.

"Uv course Professer," he said with a thick French accent. "I am sorree." Across the room, Malfoy and the other Slytherins snickered loudly. Fontaine, however, looked utterly nonplussed. He strode purposefully across the room and took a seat right next to Malfoy, who stared at him with open contempt. Snape snarled.

"This year we will be studying poisons, antidotes, and medicinal potions. Your first project will be to complete the following antidote and surmise, from its ingredients, which poison it counteracts." He waved his hand at the blackboard and a list of instructions appeared in his messy scrawl. "Begin."

"What a jerk!" Gwyn whispered to Harry as they began assembling the ingredients they would need for the highly complicated antidote Snape had set for them to work on. "Is he always like this?" Harry nodded as Snape gave them both a menacing glare for whispering from his customary position near the Slytherins.

Determined not to give Snape any opportunity to throw him out, Harry concentrated with all his might on each step of his potion, cutting up his herbs and mushrooms into tiny, even pieces, measuring his liquids with the precision of a chemist, and adding it all together exactly as the instructions dictated.

About an hour into the lesson, the room was quiet save the soft rumble of cauldrons bubbling, the dull thud of knives against wood as ingredients were carefully chopped, and the relentless hissing of Malfoy and the other Slytherins whispering to one another. Hermione suddenly stopped what she was doing. She was frowning at the blackboard very intently. Snape had approached the Slytherins and was now talking to Malfoy loudly about the disgracefully easy questions that had been on the previous year's O.W.L. exam, and he did not notice when Gwyn leaned over and seemed to whisper a question to Hermione. Hermione nodded at Gwyn. Harry frowned as he watched them continue to whisper back and forth for several seconds. Then they both turned towards Harry and began to try to gesture unobtrusively at the black board. Harry frowned at them both, wanting to know what was going on.

Quickly, Gwyn dug into her bag and produced a scrap of parchment on which she scribbled a few lines. She held it out and Harry was about to take it, when, out of nowhere, Snape sidled up behind them.

"Passing notes, Potter? Isn't that a bit childish? This is *supposed* to be an advanced potions class -- for advanced students!" Harry opened his mouth to protest, but Gwyn beat him to it.

"I'm sorry," she interjected coolly, "but I was just trying to warn Harry that you've reversed two of the steps in the instructions and that if he follows them as they're written, his antidote will go wrong." Snape's black eyes flashed.

"I beg your pardon!" he hissed. Gwyn never flinched. She began to repeat herself more slowly and clearly.

"I said that two of the steps in your instructions--"

"I heard what you said, Miss Griffiths, but I daresay that I, as potions master of this school, might know a bit more about the correct order of the steps--"

"I'm sure it was just an oversight," Gwyn interrupted. Harry stared at her. In his five years of Snape's classes, he didn't think he'd ever heard a student interrupt Professor Snape before. Snape seemed to be thinking along the same lines. His eyes narrowed dangerously to mere slits and a muscle twitched in his lip.

"I realize, Miss Griffiths, that in your country common courtesy is a rare thing, but in this school, in my class, you will address me as *sir* and speak only when you are spoken to!"

Gwyn gave him a very small, very wry smile.

"Yes *sir*, but in my country, it is also considered common courtesy to admit when one has made a mistake." Snape looked like he might burst into flames at any moment. Harry fancied he could

almost see smoke beginning to issue from under his lank, greasy, black hair. Gwyn didn't wait for him to respond.

"You see, *sir* Hermione believes that if we add the shredded boomslang skin *after* the dried feverfew, the boomslang will effectively counteract the anti-conflagratory properties of the feverfew, and the resulting antidote would be, to say the least, catastrophic for whomever might be unfortunate enough to have to test it." Hermione seemed to have shrunk several sizes as she slid further and further down in her seat trying to avoid being drawn into the altercation. "And I tend to agree with her," Gwyn added, apparently not noticing that her partner seemed to want to disavow all complicity entirely.

Snape's eyes snapped for a moment over to the blackboard and then back to Gwyn. There was absolute silence in the room. Harry hardly dared to breathe for fear that it might set Snape off.

Suddenly, with a brusque movement, Snape flicked his wand at the blackboard. The two offending steps reversed themselves. "Ten points from Ravenclaw," he hissed menacingly, "and another outburst like that from you, Miss Griffiths, will earn you a detention!"

Harry could barely wait to get out of the dungeon. He cleared up his potions ingredients at record speed and he, Gwyn, and Hermione dashed out of the dungeon.

"Brilliant!" Harry crowed, "Utterly brilliant! I don't think I've ever seen Snape look that buggered before!" Gwyn shrugged. But Hermione was shaking her head.

"It's ridiculous the way he plays favorites!" she exclaimed breathlessly. "I mean, we were perfectly right! He shouldn't have taken points off, even if you were being a tad rude..." Gwyn gave her a vaguely affronted look.

"He was the one being rude," she retorted. "Maybe he'll think twice before he tries to bully me again." Harry grinned, but Hermione gave them both a worried look.

At dinner that night, Harry gleefully recounted the story to Ron, including each and every one of Snape's pricelessly astounded reactions. Ron, however, didn't seem nearly as amused with the idea of rubbing Snape's greasy nose in his mistake as much as Harry would have thought. He just ate with his customary record-breaking speed and grunted in the appropriate places.

"I was thinking," Ron cut in as Harry was about to recall for the third time the look on Snape's face when Gwyn had told him he'd gotten the steps wrong, "that you ought to put up a sign up sheet for Quiddich tryouts." Harry nodded vaguely, a bit put off by the abrupt change in subject. "And," Ron continued eagerly, his eyes shining, "I was thinking we could have them this Friday. That way, we can start practicing with the new team right away."

"That seems a bit quick," Hermione said as she added salt to her peas and potatoes. "What's the rush?" Ron gave her a withering look.

"Hermione, new players can mess with the whole rhythm of a team! You have to practice about ten times more with new players than with an established team just to get used to one another, find your zone." Hermione raised her eyebrows.

"Your zone?" she repeated.

"Yeah! Like, when all the players know each other so well that they know what the others are going to do before they even do it." Hermione continued to look unconvinced. "Oh go on then. Harry knows what I mean." Harry was not exactly sure he did know what Ron meant. After all, Ron had been the new man on the team last year, and he certainly had never seemed to get into his "zone" -- at least, not while Harry was playing with him.

"So anyway," Ron continued, blatantly turning away from Hermione to signify that he was done explaining obvious things to her, "what do you reckon about Friday?" Harry shrugged.

"Yeah, I guess Friday is ok." Ron grinned broadly.

"Great!" he exclaimed, pulling a piece of parchment out of his pocket. "Then I'll just go on up and post this on the notice board!" Harry barely caught a glimpse of what looked like a sign-up sheet that had been painstakingly illustrated with flying bludgers, waving Gryffindor flags, and a tiny Golden Snitch before Ron had leaped up from the table and dashed out of the Great Hall.

"What's got in to him?" Harry asked, watching Ron practically skipping out of the room.

"I don't know," Hermione replied, "but I think it's serious. He didn't even finish his pudding."

CHAPTER TEN -- Feeling Defensive

The sixth year Defense class was unusually large. It was much larger, in fact, than any of their other N.E.W.T. level classes, and this was plainly because every single sixth year member of the DA had earned an outstanding on his or her O.W.L. Much to Harry's amusement, neither Malfoy nor any of his gang was in attendance. To his disappointment, however, neither was Gwyn. She had said that Defense Against the Dark Arts was not a required class at her school, and that she'd never taken it before.

Demetria Lindell was quite different from anything anyone had expected when they thought of their new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher. Seamus and Dean had confessed they thought the young professor was pretty and therefore concluded that she would probably be a pushover. Harry thought she looked tough and that she might start teaching them something useful. Ron thought she couldn't possibly be as boring as Umbridge. They were all wrong.

They entered the room quietly, the excited chatter of the sixth years dying into respectful silence as the young woman surveyed them over the tops of her glasses from where she stood at the front of the room. Calmly she set a leather dossier on the desk and opened it.

"This is N.E.W.T. level Defense Against the Dark Arts for sixth years. If you received anything less than Exceeds Expectations on your Defense O.W.L. you should not be here." She paused, as if expecting someone to get up and leave, but when no one did, she turned to the blackboard and began writing in a small delicate script. "My name is Professor Lindell. I was, until recently, a Scriptionist and an Unspeakable for the Ministry of Magic." Harry glanced at Ron, whose eyes were wide and impressed; he wondered what on earth a Scriptionist was. Professor Lindell was drawing a complex set of diagrams on the blackboard. She glanced down at her notes, nodded, and let go of the chalk, which continued the drawing of its own accord.

"I have been made aware of your rather spotty history in Defense," she said, dusting her hands together as she turned back to face them, "and I must say, I am utterly astonished that, with the lack of proper rudimentary education you've been given in the subject, so many of you were able to pass the test." She gingerly set aside the first sheet of parchment from her dossier and took up the second.

"Miss Abbott?" she read, peering over the top of her paper. Hannah raised her hand. "Would you please tell me some of the similarities between the shield charm and the stunning charm?" Hannah stared at the Professor, her eyes wide.

"I..." she began uncertainly. Professor Lindell continued to stare at her with a hard level gaze. Harry glanced over at Hermione and was surprised to see her eyebrows knitted and her hand by her side. "They're both charms?" Hannah blurted out desperately. Professor Lindell raised one eyebrow ever so slightly, but said nothing. She made a small mark on her paper with her quill. Ernie patted Hannah's hand and looked daggers at Professor Lindell.

"Mr. Goldstein?" Anthony's face went a shade whiter as he put up his hand hesitantly. "Do you know the Reductor Curse?" Anthony relaxed visibly as he nodded. Harry had taught them all that curse in DA meetings the previous year. "Can you please tell us," Professor Lindell continued, "why that particular curse does not require a specific wand movement to accompany it?" Anthony blanched again. Ron turned to stare open mouthed at Harry, who merely shrugged.

"I'll take that as a no," Professor Lindell said, making another tick on her paper. She continued down her list asking each of them impossibly hard questions not about performing a spell, or what

it did, but about *why* it worked and *how*. Neville practically fainted when she asked him to explain the fundamental differences between dark magic and regular magic, and Parvati Patil looked like she might cry when Professor Lindell told her that dark detectors like Foe Glasses and Sneakoscopes were not based on Divination principles. None of them, with the exception of Hermione, seemed to have any idea how to answer her questions, and Hermione only barely satisfied the Professor, earning herself an "Mmm..." for her trouble.

"Mr. Potter..." Harry's stomach clenched. He raised his hand, but Professor Lindell did not look up from her paper. "Ah yes. Mr. Potter. I have heard rumors that you are at the top of your class in this subject." Harry put his hand down.

"Yes ma'am," he said quietly, wondering desperately what inane thing she might ask him and running over in his mind all the spells he knew. It was almost how he felt when preparing to battle a Death Eater -- but Death Eaters had never asked him to explain how he could do the spells he could do.

"I have also heard that you can conjure a Patronus, is that correct?" Harry nodded.

"Yes ma'am. Several of us can." Hermione gave him a small smile.

"Perhaps you would be so kind then, as to tell the class what other types of charms the Patronus Charm derives from." Harry's mouth went dry, but then he remembered what Professor Flitwick had told him in Charms.

"Illusions?" he asked cautiously. Professor Lindell looked up at last to give him an appraising stare.

"Anything else?" she asked dryly. Harry shrugged, at a loss. Professor Lindell pressed her lips together tightly. "I will give you partial credit for at least knowing that," she said, as she ticked off his name on her list.

"Well," she said after sufficiently cowering the class, "it seems I certainly have my work cut out for me this year, if I am to give you any semblance of a chance of passing your N.E.W.T.s. We will begin at the beginning with the root of all spells. Please copy the notes from the blackboard and use them to supplement your reading of chapters one through five for the next class."

As the students began to work, they also began shooting furtively disbelieving looks at one another. Was this woman for real? Her notes were incredibly complex, going on and on about the origins of magic and the intricacies of spells, and the blackboard kept erasing itself when Harry was only half way through copying them, to start on the next bit. He hoped Hermione was faster than he was and that she would let him copy hers. Aside from the notes, he was also disgruntled with the reading assignment they'd been given. He had flipped through his text over the summer, but had immediately put it aside thinking he'd save it to read the next time he had a case of insomnia. Reading five chapters in two days was going to be no easy task.

When the class was finally over, everyone seemed in quite a hurry to get out of the room. Harry stuffed the pages of notes into his satchel and bolted for the door.

"Mr. Potter," Professor Lindell said, "I would like a word with you, if I may." Harry stopped, his hand already on the door. Hermione and Ron both gave him sympathetic looks as they passed. Harry turned back and stood next to the professor's desk, where she was writing furiously. She did not look up until every other student had left the room.

"Professor Dumbledore tells me you organized an illegal Defense group last year," she said bluntly. Harry nodded slowly. There was no point in denying it if Dumbledore had told her about the DA. Was he going to be punished for something he'd done before she even arrived?

"He expressed his desire for this group to continue as a proper club, and asked me if I would be willing to be your faculty sponsor." Shocked, Harry found himself picturing her standing in the Room of Requirement forcing them to copy down even more elaborate notes, and he frowned slightly. "It is obvious from your expression that you don't want me interfering with your group, and frankly," she continued, "I have absolutely no desire whatsoever to do so. I have much better

things to do with my free time than play nursemaid to a group of students who want to hurl curses at one another." Harry scowled and started to protest, but thought better of it when Professor Lindell looked up at him. She stared at him with a somewhat sour expression on her face, and he noticed that her eyes were a steely grey.

"So," she said, laying her hands neatly across the top of her desk, "what exactly are we going to do about this?" Harry felt decidedly wrong-footed and he didn't know how to answer her. She picked up her quill and held it poised over her parchment. "Come now, you must have some ideas," she said tartly.

"Well, Professor," Harry replied nervously, "we did get on just fine last year without any, er... faculty sponsor..." He wondered if that was really the right thing to say. He didn't like her to think that they didn't want her, but at the same time, they didn't.

"That was exactly my thought, Mr. Potter, but Professor Dumbledore was adamant that your group become a legal club, and by Hogwarts rules, all clubs must have a faculty sponsor." She leaned forward, a glint of amusement popping unexpectedly into her grey eyes. "You don't want me there, and I don't want to be there, so why don't you just bring me a copy of your meeting schedule and a roster of everyone in the club, and we shall make that the extent of my involvement as your sponsor. Does that sound reasonable to you?" Harry nodded. It sounded more than reasonable; it sounded too good to be true. Afraid she might change her mind, he quickly turned to go.

"Mr. Potter, I also heard from the headmaster that you have been studying Occlumency with Professor Snape." Harry turned back towards her, hoping somewhat belatedly that his intense dislike of Snape would not show in his face. Professor Lindell raised her eyebrow slightly once again. "He has asked me to take over these lessons, citing personal reasons for Professor Snape's inability to continue them with you." She stared at him questioningly, obviously waiting for an explanation.

"Professor Snape and I, we... we don't really get along," Harry said finally. Professor Lindell's other eyebrow went up in an expression that might have been surprise, or even approval.

"Very well, Mr. Potter. It seems we have something in common other than an interest in Defense. I will see you on Friday morning for your first Occlumency lesson." She took up her quill and went back to her notes. Harry took this as a dismissal and bolted from the room. Hermione and Ron were waiting for him at the end of the corridor.

"What did she want?" Hermione asked anxiously.

"She's the new faculty sponsor for the DA and she's going to be teaching me Occlumency," Harry said in one breath.

Ron groaned sympathetically. "That's rotten luck!" Harry shook his head.

"No, I don't think so. She doesn't want anything to do with the DA, so she's going to let us run it just the way we were before." Hermione looked surprised.

"But that's wonderful, Harry! We can pick up right where we left off and not worry about anyone telling us the spells are too difficult or too advanced or any of that nonsense." Harry nodded.

"And when she asked me why Snape wasn't teaching my Occlumency lessons any more, she let on that she doesn't like him any more than I do!"

"I wonder why?" Hermione said thoughtfully. Ron snorted disdainfully.

"Because he's a great slimy git, that's why!" Hermione rolled her eyes, but did not disagree. They rounded the corner and made for the entrance to the Great Hall, but before they could even pass through the doors, Harry was accosted by most of his Defense class.

"Oh Harry it was awful!" Parvati cried dramatically. "When are we starting up the DA again? We'll never learn anything from that hag!" Seamus pushed to the front of the group.

"She's hardly a hag," he said with a smirk, "but how are we supposed to learn any practical defense if she's just going to have us copying down diagrams all term?"

"We have to begin at once!" Ernie Macmillan threw in pompously. "Even if we have to go underground with it again!"

"Yeah Harry," Neville piped up from where he was being squashed between Terry Boot and Michael Corner, "with Voldemort back, we need all the practice we can get!" Several people shuddered at the name, and most turned to stare, somewhat shocked at Neville's boldness. Harry held up his hands.

"It's OK!" he said quickly. "We don't have to keep it a secret any more!"

"As if it still would be after all this," Hermione grumbled under her breath as she looked around at the curious stares they were eliciting from other students.

"Professor Dumbledore is making us an official club, and Professor Lindell is going to be our faculty sponsor. But—" Harry added quickly, as several people began to protest, "she's not going to come to meetings. We just have to have a teacher listed in order to be a proper club." A murmur of general assent passed through the group.

"So when are we starting, then?" Susan Bones asked, her face a mask of anxiety. It was Hermione who answered her.

"Have you all still got your coins?" Most people nodded, although Neville had a slightly panicked look about him. "Fine. Once Harry sets a date, we'll let you know that way, same as before."

"What about new members?" Justin Finch-Fletchly asked. "My brother's just started as a first year, but I'm sure he'd want to join." Harry frowned uncertainly. If they opened the club up to more people, he didn't know if he could handle it. They already had more than twenty students. Hermione quickly shook her head.

"We'll accept new members, but only fourth years and up. The magic we're doing is too difficult for anyone younger." Harry was grateful that she could take charge of those kinds of details. Finally, the group broke up and everyone scattered to their respective tables to bolt down some lunch before their next class.

Just as Harry was filling his plate with corned beef sandwiches and crisps, Gwyn dropped onto the bench right next to him.

"What was that all about," she asked with a grin, "the Harry Potter fan club?" Ron laughed and Harry gave them both a dirty look.

"No!" he said hotly. "Who told you that?" Gwyn started at his reaction.

"No one! It was just a joke. Geez, lighten up, Harry." Harry sighed.

"We were just talking about the first meeting of our Defense club," Hermione said, trying to change the subject. "Everyone wanted to know when we'll be starting back up." Gwyn glanced around the room at the various members still making their way to their house tables.

"Wow, pretty popular club," she said, sounding impressed.

"Well of course it is!" Ron replied haughtily. "Everyone knows that You-Know-Who is back, and we want to be prepared." Gwyn gave him a rather incredulous look.

"Prepared for what? The way you talk, it's like you expect an all out war! I supposed you're afraid of being drafted?" Ron wrinkled his nose at her. She glanced sideways at Harry. "Come on, even if there is a war, you don't all really think that *you're* going to be the ones who have to fight it?"

Harry felt the familiar knot of guilt and fear forming in his stomach. Ron, Hermione, and the others? Maybe not. But him...

Hermione gazed levelly at Gwyn, her expression serious and her eyes cold. "Why shouldn't we think so? Ron and I have been helping Harry fight since our first year. The Death Eaters don't care how old you are; they'll kill anyone who gets in their way. And we tend to get in their way with alarming regularity." Ron nodded sanctimoniously and Gwyn gave a little laugh. Harry frowned.

"You still don't believe that this is real, do you?" he asked angrily. Gwyn gave him an apologetic look, but didn't answer. "Well, that's just great. I'll just go and tell Cedric's parents that he's not really dead then, shall I?" Hermione and Ron dropped their gazes to their plates, but Gwyn just stared.

"Who..."

"It doesn't matter," Harry cut her off. Feeling very disgruntled, he grabbed his sandwich and took and overly large bite. No one said anything.

Awkwardly, Gwyn stood and made to go. "I guess I'll see you in class then," she said quietly before walking back to the Ravenclaw table.

"Silly bint!" Ron spat. Harry didn't know whether to agree with him or not. He took another huge bite of his sandwich to avoid having to say anything and nearly choked.

"Well, you can't really blame her, Ron," Hermione chided. "She's just reacting to what she hears at home, where Harry and V-Voldemort are a bit of a joke." Harry made a face.

"Thanks a lot," he grumbled. Hermione gave him a withering look, but decided to change the subject.

"Why didn't Professor Lindell want to come to our DA meetings?" she asked.

Harry shrugged. "I kind of got the impression that she feels a bit above it all, didn't you?" Ron nodded enthusiastically.

"High and mighty if you ask me," he agreed, taking another sandwich.

"Well maybe we should try to change her mind," Hermione continued. "She could probably teach us a lot. I mean, she's a Scriptionist, and an Occlumens, and it's obvious she knows loads of fascinating stuff about magic and the dark arts."

"It is?" Ron asked skeptically. Hermione rounded on him.

"Well of course! You were taking the notes too. I thought her theories on the origins of magic were particularly interesting." Ron stared at her in amazement.

"You mean you understood all that rubbish?" Hermione nodded slowly.

"Well, most of it anyway," she admitted, blushing slightly.

"I meant to ask," Harry said quickly, before Hermione had a chance to explain what she found so fascinating, "what's a Scriptionist?"

"A person who writes spells," Hermione said simply. Harry frowned.

"What do you mean? She just writes them down?"

Ron shook his head. "A Scriptinoist makes up *new* spells. From scratch. They work in the Department of Mysteries. Dad's told me it's really really hard to do." Hermione nodded.

"It's one of the most difficult things one can do with magic, creating a whole new spell from the beginning. I wonder why she left the Ministry?" She looked up and suddenly Harry noticed that the Great Hall was clearing rather rapidly. "Look at the time!" Hermione exclaimed. "We're going to be late!"

CHAPTER ELEVEN -- Hearts of Stone

As Harry, Ron, and Hermione ran down the soggy hill towards Hagrid's hut in the muggy afternoon sun, they saw a group of people walking back up the hill towards them, the largest of whom was instantly recognizable.

"There yeh are!" Hagrid bellowed as the class scurried up the hill in his wake. "Meh three best pupils late on th' first day! Best be sharp today or I might have ter dock yeh some points!" He gave Harry a very theatrical wink as they turned to join him and the rest of their classmates walking back up to the castle.

"Hagrid!" Hermione said, falling into stride next to the huge gamekeeper, and having to jog slightly to keep up, "where are we going?"

"Field trip!" Hagrid announced jovially. "We're goin' ter catch us some creatures for yeh to look after this term." Hermione's eyes widened with anxiety, but she did not reply.

They reentered the castle and began immediately traveling upwards. Harry wondered what kinds of creatures they could catch in the castle. At first he thought that they were headed for the astronomy tower, but when they made a left instead of a right at the Tapestry of Woraug, a wizard who had turned a number of dragons into fire-breathing toads, Harry found himself losing his bearings completely.

"This place needs escalators!" Gwyn panted next to him as they continued climbing ever higher. Harry chose not to reply, half because he was also out of breath, and half because he wasn't sure if he was speaking to Gwyn yet. Gwyn caught Ron's slightly confused expression and added, "Muggle invention! Moving stairs!" He gave her a disgusted look.

"I know what an excalater is!" he retorted. "Besides, Hogwarts *has* got moving stairs!" He motioned to a staircase several flights below them that was in the process of changing its position. Harry doubted very much whether Ron really had a firm grasp on the concept of an escalator.

When they finally reached the top of the last staircase, Harry found that they were in a part of the castle he had never seen before. The passageway they entered looked less like a hall in a castle, and more like someone's dusty old attic. The walls were pitched and sloped inwards, as if they were standing directly under the eaves of the roof. The passageway was also rather dark and the air was thick with dust and cobwebs.

"Geroft! Geroft!" Ron shouted suddenly, doing a panicked little dance and frantically beating himself about the head and shoulders as he walked through a large spider's web. Obligingly, Hermione began dusting the strands of silk from his back and reassuring him that there were no spiders on him. Behind them, someone sniggered.

Abruptly, the passageway ended in a triangularly shaped wall with a similarly triangular doorway set into it. Hagrid pulled a massive ring of keys from one of his many pockets and fitted one of them easily into the door. Harry stared at it skeptically. The doorway was hardly big enough for Hermione to go through without stooping; he couldn't imagine how Hagrid planned to get through it. To his amazement, however, either the doorway grew or Hagrid shrank, because he passed through it quite easily, as did the rest of the class. Even Ron didn't have to stoop, although Harry could have sworn the door frame was only inches above his own head when he passed through.

One by one they emerged blinking into the bright sunlight. Harry squinted around trying to get his bearings. He realized suddenly that they were indeed very high up, as he could see the grounds, the forest, and the lake spread out around them like a glittering map. The air at this height was crisp and clean, but the landscape below was dulled by the hazy fuzz of the humid air. The place

they were standing was made of ancient rocks and harbored foul smelling puddles of brackish water and grime.

"The roof? Some field trip." Malfoy's voice was thick with sarcasm as he lifted the hem of his robe out of a decidedly disgusting-looking puddle. "First the forest and now this. Tell me, when did good old fashioned classrooms become a thing of the past?" Hagrid looked around at them, his cheerful expression falling as he heard Malfoy's taunts.

"Shut it, Malfoy," Ron growled under his breath. Malfoy sneered.

"Or what, Weasels? You'll do another little dance for us?"

"Or I'll make you wish you'd brought your broom..." Ron said taking a menacing step towards Malfoy and towards the edge of the roof. Hermione grabbed his arm, a slightly panicked look on her face.

"Ron don't!" she said shrilly, her eyes wide. Hagrid cleared his throat, obviously ready for the lesson to begin.

"All righ' you lot," he said, a broad smile reappearing through his bushy beard. "Who can tell me what this is?" He pointed down at a small grey lump perched on the edge of the pitched roof nearby. It had the vaguest semblance of a head, two protrusions that could be called wings, and a large grotesque mouth, but it looked to Harry to be made out of weather beaten stone.

"It's a Gargoyle," Hermione said, her voice quavering slightly. Harry noticed that she was still clinging rather forcefully to Ron's arm and that Ron was beginning to blush.

"Right yeh are, Hermione!" Hagrid beamed. Harry wondered why they were going to study sculptures in Care of Magical Creatures, that is, until Hagrid reached out and nudged the lump with his foot. Instantly, the wings batted angrily and the large mouth turned to snap at Hagrid's boot. Harry's eyes widened. Once the creature seemed to perceive that the annoyance had passed however, it went back to its original position and froze there as if it had never moved.

"It's so cute!" Parvati squealed in obvious surprise. Harry stared at the lump and tried to see exactly how it might be considered cute. Hagrid chuckled.

"So what I want yeh ter do is ter catch a few of 'em, and we'll take 'em back down ter the hut ter study." Hagrid smiled at them. No one moved.

"Er, Hagrid," Harry volunteered, "how exactly are we meant to catch them? With spells?"

"Nah. I don't reckon spells'll work on 'em. Thick skins, Harry. Thick as granite. Yeh'll 'ave ter use these." Hagrid walked around the corner and reappeared with a hand full of what looked like large butterfly nets. The class stared at them skeptically. "And be careful of 'em!" Hagrid added. "Some of 'em have got bloody great claws or fangs or what have yeh. Don't want nobody ter get bit. Well, get a move on!" Hagrid handed the nets to Phillip Fontaine to distribute. "I reckon yeh'll have ter spread out a bit ter find em. Half a dozen er so ought ter be enough."

Obediently, though still perplexed, the class began to spread out in groups of twos and threes with a net between them. Malfoy took a net quite disdainfully and complained loudly to his partner about not being able to use any spells. Neville and Gwyn paired up and headed for a likely looking parapet nearby. Harry took a net and began making his way up to a slightly higher level with Ron and Hermione following behind.

"Don't look down, don't look down, don't look down," Hermione whispered as she climbed. Once up on the higher level, she moved as far away from the edge as possible and clung to the corner of a wall. Harry looked around, but he couldn't tell the difference between the bits of rock that actually were rock, and the bits that were Gargoyles. Ron picked up a loose pebble and chucked it over the edge, then stood quite close looking down to see where it landed.

"RON!" Hermione gasped. "Don't DO that!" He gave her an odd look, a wicked grin creeping across his face that reminded Harry strongly of the twins.

"Do what?" he asked playfully. "This?" He started walking the edge of the roof like a balance beam, his long arms held out on either side, wind ruffling his hair and robes. He wobbled dramatically and Hermione gave a little shriek.

"Stop it!" she cried, still clinging to the wall.

"Harry!" Harry turned and saw Neville waving at him from a short distance away. "We found some!" Glancing back at Ron, who was now grinning wildly as he pantomimed losing his balance near the edge, Harry went over to Hermione and offered her a hand. She clutched it gratefully and they picked their way carefully over towards Neville and Gwyn who had located several Gargoyles sitting on a crumbling parapet.

"Hey!" Ron called jogging to catch up.

"Insensitive prat!" Hermione retorted angrily. Harry glanced over at Ron who looked absolutely shocked.

"See if you can't lure that one out a little more, Neville," Gwyn said. Harry and the others watched as Neville cautiously approached the little knob of stone. He considered for a moment how to "lure it out" as Gwyn suggested, then, failing to come up with anything, picked up a pebble and chucked it at the creature. Instantly the little form began to move. This one had large wings like an eagle and a rather globular face with enormous round ears and a big 'O' shaped mouth, but it didn't seem to have any teeth or claws. It began to beat its wings furiously and emitted a strangely deep guttural clanging noise like a large church bell. It turned to face Neville and suddenly a powerful blast of water shot out of its mouth, hitting Neville squarely in the face. Shocked, Neville launched backwards towards the edge and Hermione screamed.

"*Impedimenta!*" Harry shouted, drawing his wand without even thinking about it. Neville froze mid air, still leaning dangerously out over the edge, his arms splayed wildly in an attempt to regain his balance, and his eyes screwed shut against the Gargoyle water. Gwyn hurried over, dropping the great butterfly net, and grabbed both of his hands, trying to pull him back away from the edge. Neville's shoes scraped against the gravel on the ground as she pulled, and Harry hurried over to help her. Once Neville seemed to be out of danger, Harry waved his wand and muttered "*Finite incatatem*," and Neville stumbled back to life.

"Thanks," he sputtered, regaining his balance. He was soaked to the skin from the Gargoyle's blast.

"Let's catch this thing quick so you can get inside," Harry said. Gwyn picked up her net and went back over to the Gargoyle, which had moved a bit in its attempt to frighten Neville away. She easily slapped the net down over it, but at once it began to thrash and to try to take off.

"Now what?" she demanded loudly over the ringing tones of the Gargoyle's cry.

"There's a string!" Harry said suddenly, spotting it. He hurried forward and pulled on it, causing the net to cinch up like a drawstring bag, but it couldn't close completely without catching part of the Gargoyle in the net, and part out.

"Flip it over!" Harry commanded. Gwyn did, and just as the Gargoyle jumped in the air to try to fly away, Harry pulled the drawstring tight and it was caught. Gwyn grinned at him.

"Don't touch me!" Hermione yelled suddenly. Harry turned to find her sitting, curled in a little ball, against one of the far walls. Ron was squatting next to her, and had obviously been trying to comfort her. Apparently, however, it wasn't working.

"Don't even talk to me!" she yelled, standing up again. She took a few steps away from him, but didn't leave the safety of the wall. "I never make fun when you're afraid of a little cobweb!" Ron's face began to turn red. He opened his mouth to try to say something, but Hermione cut him off.

"I don't want to hear it, Ronald Weasley! You can just sod off! I can't help that I d-don't like heights!" She crossed her arms angrily and bit her lip, which Harry recognized as a tactic she used when she was trying not to cry. He turned to Neville who was now sniffling loudly.

"Why don't you and Gwyn take Hermione and the Gargoyle back and see if Hagrid will let you go for the rest of the class." Neville nodded.

"I'll stay and help you," Gwyn said brightly, handing Neville the net with the Gargoyle still struggling at the end. Still looking like an angry cat, Hermione joined Neville and the two of them made their way back towards Hagrid and the others. For a moment, Ron stood glaring at their backs, his face an angry shade of red. When they were gone, Ron turned and stomped away in the opposite direction. Harry sighed.

"Good thing I stayed," Gwyn observed. "I think there's another one under this ledge." Harry was relieved of the need to respond by allowing himself to search for the Gargoyle. He fished around under the ledge with his net, but there wasn't enough clearance to get it around the little lump, which was huddled in the corner protesting loudly at them with a higher pitched ringing than the other. Gwyn squatted down, peering under the ledge and trying to figure out how to get the little monster to come out. Shooting Harry a wary glance, she picked up a loose rock.

"Nothing for it," she said with a shrug. Harry stood back several paces and readied the net. Gwyn tried to hide herself behind a large bit of crumbled stone and then lobbed the stone at the Gargoyle. The stone made contact with a clatter and the little beast leaped into the air, taking off.

"Oh no!" Gwyn cried as the little grey creature flapped upwards. Harry's Quidditch instincts took over and he swung out with the net, missing the Gargoyle by a hair. He swung again, and felt the weight of it catch against the net.

"The string!" he cried. Gwyn ran over and grasped for the string as Harry tried to keep the struggling beast confined to the net. She gave it a hard yank and the net closed over the Gargoyle. Harry pulled the net back, over the solid rock wall, and took a look at their catch. This one was quite a bit smaller than the other and had a long pointed face. It had two horns growing out of its head, one growing out of its chin, and two long fangs hanging out of its mouth. Its wings beat hard against the net, but didn't seem to be in danger of tearing it. It let out another loud, reverberating ring.

"B flat," Gwyn said with a smile. Harry shifted the net and was surprised at how heavy the Gargoyle was for its size. Gwyn's smile faded and she looked at him earnestly, strands of blonde and pink hair curling neatly around her face.

"Listen, Harry, about what I said earlier..."

"Er, let's just get this thing back to Hagrid," Harry interrupted, looking away. "It's not getting any lighter." Gwyn stared at him for a moment, but nodded. Silently they made their way back towards Hagrid, listening to the occasional bell-like sounds that rang through the muggy afternoon air.

As they rounded the last corner, they were met with the sight of Malfoy and Hagrid facing off. Malfoy's partner, Nott, was standing behind them soaking wet and looking terrified, a Gargoyle lying still at his feet.

"Never in all meh years!" Hagrid bellowed deafeningly. His face was red above his wild beard and his eyes burned with a fury Harry had never seen. "Fifty points from Slytherin! Detention! And Professor Dumbledore will 'ave ter hear about this!" Malfoy sneered.

"You're damned right he will!" he snapped. "Just wait until I tell my father. That thing *bit* me while I was under your so-called supervision! You'll be sacked this time for sure, if I have anything to say about it!"

"And you'll be *expelled* if I 'ave anythin' ter say about it!" Hagrid roared. "Killin' innocent creatures ain't never justified!" Harry saw Gwyn's eyes widen as they both realized that the Gargoyle at Nott's feet was dead. "Now get outta my sight!" Hagrid bellowed, pointing at the door. Still fuming,

Malfoy turned haughtily and went into the castle with Nott following close on his heels. As they entered the passage, Harry heard Malfoy laugh. The words "two beasts with one stone..." echoed out to them. Harry clenched his fists around the Gargoyle net, bitter anger coursing through his veins.

He and Gwyn hurried forward as Hagrid bent to pick up the fallen Gargoyle. It wasn't any bigger than the one they had caught, and it fit snugly in the palm of Hagrid's enormous hand. He stared down at it for a long moment.

"Is it really dead?" Gwyn asked timidly. Hagrid nodded.

"Can't rightly figure how he done it, neither," he said as he gazed sadly at the little body in his hands. "Tain't easy ter kill a Gargoyle."

"Is there anything we can do, Hagrid?" Harry asked. Hagrid looked down at him, his beetle black eyes watering.

"Nah, nah," he said quickly. "Nothin' ter be done. You just get that one down ter the hut," he said, indicating the Gargoyle still flapping its wings in their net. "There's crates for 'em near the pumpkin patch. I got ter round up the rest o' the class..."

With heavy hearts, Gwyn and Harry made their way back through the attic passageway, down the many stairs to the Entrance Hall and out into the grounds. Harry's arms were beginning to feel like rubber as he continued to hold the heavy Gargoyle, although it had finally stopped thrashing and ringing and now once again resembled a very crudely wrought sculpture. As they crossed the grounds, they met Neville and Hermione coming back from Hagrid's hut. Hermione drew her wand as she saw them approaching.

"*Wingardium Leviosa!*" she said, flicking her wand at Harry's net, which instantly became as light as air as it floated out of his hands.

"Why didn't I think of that?" he grumbled, flexing his sore muscles.

"You go ahead, Neville. I'll help Harry and Gwyn," Hermione said, directing the net to fly in front of them towards Hagrid's hut. She seemed to feel much better now that her feet were planted on solid ground. Neville nodded and hurried back up towards the castle. He was no longer soaked, and Harry suspected that that might also have been Hermione's handiwork.

"I think I'll head back too," Gwyn said suddenly. She glanced at Harry and then averted her eyes. "If it's all the same to you," she added. He nodded and she turned quickly back up the hill.

"Everything OK, Harry?" Hermione asked as they started back towards the hut.

"Not by half," Harry replied glumly. He quickly recounted what had happened between Hagrid and Malfoy as they reached the crates Hagrid had assembled in his pumpkin patch. They carried the Gargoyle over to an empty one and unceremoniously dumped it in.

"He's just vile," Hermione said vehemently as they watched the Gargoyle hide in the straw at the bottom of the crate. It clanged again meekly, and Harry suddenly decided the little lump was quite cute. He felt a hot, sick jolt of anger at Malfoy. Slowly, he and Hermione stood and headed back towards the castle. Neither seemed in much of a hurry to get back.

"What happened to Ron?" Hermione asked finally. Harry shrugged.

"Dunno. He just stormed off somewhere after you left." She studied the ground as they walked.

"Why does he have to be such an insensitive jerk all the time?" she demanded. "I mean, it's not as though I go around teasing him about spiders or anything. You don't make fun of me for being afraid of heights." Harry shrugged.

"Well, I already knew about it, didn't I?" he said. "I'm the one that got the life squeezed out of me and my eardrums split riding Buckbeak." Hermione shrugged, still looking surly. Harry didn't know what to tell her.

"I expect he just thought he was being funny," he said with a shrug, though it sounded a lame excuse, even to him.

"Well he wasn't!" Hermione retorted. "He could have fallen, or the rocks could have given way, or a strong gust of wind..." She scowled, but Harry could hear the genuine concern in her tone. "He's such a child!" she spat finally. "Next thing you know he'll be pulling my hair and shooting spit wads at me at lunch. Honestly, if I didn't know any better I'd think..." Her voice trailed off.

"What?" Harry asked. Hermione blushed.

"What? Nothing." They made their way back to the common room in silence. As they climbed through the portrait hole, Harry saw Ron slumped in a squashy armchair near the windows. He and Hermione looked at one another across the room and he quickly stood and headed for the dormitory stairs.

"See you at dinner, Harry," Hermione said coldly as she headed in the opposite direction. Harry sighed.

CHAPTER TWELVE -- The Flying Lions

Over the next few days, Ron and Hermione continued to ignore one another, but Harry had long ago become accustomed to their routine of constant bickering. It was practically second nature for him to slip into his role as intermediary between the two. Harry spent his time with Hermione going over Potions essays and copying down the notes he'd missed in Defense Against the Dark Arts, and spent his time with Ron going over Quidditch maneuvers, training theories, and speculations on who would make the best new Chaser for the Gryffindor team. Between the two, he'd hardly had a moment to himself.

By the time Friday morning rolled around, Harry was actually quite glad to be heading off to his first Occlumency lesson alone. Ron hadn't shut up about Quidditch in two days, and studying with Hermione all the time was beginning to make his head ache. When Harry had mentioned the possibility of reconciliation to Ron, he'd been subjected to a lecture on how the whole thing was really Hermione's fault for being too sensitive; and when he'd brought it up with Hermione, all he got was a resounding "Humph."

Harry knocked on the door to Professor Lindell's office. Perhaps it was because he no longer had to face the prospect of Snape waiting on the other side, but he was surprised to discover that he was actually quite keen to study Occlumency again, although as he considered it, a dark shadow of guilt seemed to cloud his vision. If only he'd been able to drum up this much enthusiasm for the subject when he'd really needed it... Thoughts of a whispering veil filled his mind, and he screwed his eyes shut against the image of Sirius arcing gracefully back through it. Suddenly, he felt a painful prickling in his scar. It caught him off guard and he opened his eyes wide. His hand strayed up to his scar and he gasped with the sharp stinging pain. He hadn't felt anything since the battle at the Ministry, and had assumed that Voldemort decided to block him out, but now--

"Feeling all right, Mr. Potter?" Harry started as he found himself face to face with Professor Lindell. She was staring at him with interest. *Strike that* he thought as he put his hand down, *she's staring at your scar with interest*. He quickly lowered his hand from his forehead.

"I'm fine, thanks," Harry said quickly. Professor Lindell took a step back from the door and Harry entered her office. He was thoroughly relieved to see that the disgusting technicolor kittens, dried flowers, and doilies of Umbridge's reign had gone from the room. Instead, the walls were covered in large pieces of parchment showing diagrams and equations even more complex than the ones Lindell had been giving them to copy down in class all week. Several of these diagrams were moving, the runes flickering and changing as the lines connecting them wiggled from one place to another. On the wall behind her desk, a large circle had been drawn with some kind of silvery white paint. Around the edges of the circle were runes that Harry didn't recognize, zodiac symbols, and

the phases of the moon. As he stared at it, Harry realized that the circle was turning almost imperceptibly.

But there were more normal things in the office as well. Harry recognized a Sneakoscope amid an array of other instruments sitting in a cabinet on the opposite wall, and on top of the cabinet was a small collection of photographs in matching silver frames. A young girl in pigtails and glasses waved cheekily at him from one of them. Under the window, a large potted plant with glossy leaves basked in the sunlight.

Professor Lindell brushed past him towards her desk. She was wearing dark blue robes, almost black really, and her hair was again caught up in a complex twist at the back of her head that seemed to defy physics.

"Have a seat, Mr. Potter," she instructed, motioning to a comfortably worn looking chair on the opposite side of her desk as she dropped into her own chair. Harry sat obediently. He noticed that her desk was covered in sheets of parchment with more diagrams and equations on them. He also noticed a ball of yarn and knitting needles sitting on a shelf behind her, and smiled inwardly, making a mental note to tell Hermione that she had a kindred spirit in the castle.

"Well, Mr. Potter, I haven't had the... opportunity to review your progress with Professor Snape, so I would like you to tell me how far you and he advanced in your lessons."

"Well," Harry began uncertainly, "... he would tell me to clear my mind, then he would use Legilimency to break into my thoughts and I would... er... try to block him?" Harry realized that although he had been taking lessons with Snape for the better part of a year, he actually knew very little about the process of Occlumency. Lindell raised an eyebrow in an expression of disbelief.

"And you would practice clearing your mind?" she asked. Harry nodded, though he wondered if practice were really the right word for it. "What techniques did Professor Snape show you to help you with that?" Harry stared at her blankly.

"Sorry?"

"What techniques did you learn to clear your mind?" Lindell repeated, her brow furrowing. Harry gave her a baffled look and shrugged. He could see that her incredulity was quickly turning to anger.

"Do you mean to tell me," she continued, now frowning quite openly, "that Professor Snape gave you no means of protecting your mind -- no instruction in how to center yourself -- before he started attacking you?" Harry gave a little nod, quite sure by her expression that he was misunderstanding something crucial. "That's appalling!" Lindell shouted. Harry flinched. She stood up abruptly and stomped across the room to her cabinet, then began rummaging through it.

"I apologize for my outburst, Mr. Potter," she said in a more even tone as she pushed aside strange looking objects and peered into the depths of her cabinet, "but I am not accustomed to spending my time making up for other people's mistakes!" She seemed to find what she was looking for, grasped it in her hand, and stomped back over to the desk. She sat down heavily and appeared to try to calm herself with a deep breath.

"Do you know what this is?" she asked, passing him the object she had retrieved from the cabinet. It was a milky white crystal roughly the size of a quail's egg. Upon closer examination, however, Harry noticed that the inside seemed to be filled with a quantity of thick white smoke that swirled and undulated within the crystal.

"It reminds me of a Remembrall," he said, feeling a bit sheepish that he didn't seem to know the answers to *any* of her questions. She gave him a small smile as he handed it back to her.

"That's a very astute comparison. This is called a Meditation Crystal, or sometimes, a Center. The stone is enchanted with a spell which reacts to and reflects the holder's state of mind, much in the same way a Remembrall does. Now, what happens to a Remembrall when the owner forgets something?"

"The smoke turns red," Harry replied. Lindell nodded.

"With a Center," she continued, "the user can affect the smoke a bit more directly. Watch the crystal." She held the crystal in the palm of her hand where Harry could see it and closed her eyes. Almost immediately, the smoke began to recede towards the center of the crystal, leaving the edges perfectly clear and empty while the smoke in the center became thicker and more opaque. Before long, the smoke had coalesced into a compact pea sized ball at the very center of the crystal. Very slowly, Professor Lindell opened her eyes.

"By focusing my mental energy on the crystal," she explained, "I can clear my mind of other, more distracting thoughts." She reached out and handed the crystal back to Harry. As soon as he took it, the smoke dispersed and again filled the entire volume of the stone.

"But," Harry said, regarding the crystal somewhat skeptically, "you wouldn't have time to use this if you were being attacked by someone."

Professor Lindell adjusted her glasses. "You play Quiddich, am I right?" Harry nodded. "And what sorts of things do you do to prepare for a game?"

"We run different plays."

"Well, what good is running a play against your teammates? The other team isn't always going to do whatever you want them to." Harry frowned slightly, wondering what she was getting at.

"But once we get good at it," he protested, "we can execute the moves no matter what the other team does and improvise when we... Oh."

Professor Lindell smiled.

"Precisely. With practice, you acquire the skill and can use it whenever and however you need it. The same applies to the Center. The Center is a tool, Mr. Potter, but once you have mastered its use, you can easily apply the same technique to quiet your mind whether you have the crystal physically with you or not." Harry studied the swirling mist contained within the crystal in his palm. "Why don't you give it a try?" Lindell suggested.

Feeling slightly vulnerable under the Professor's steely gaze, Harry consented and closed his eyes. "Picture the crystal in your mind," she prompted him. "Can you see it clearly? Now, give the smoke a little nudge." Vaguely, Harry wondered how exactly one was supposed to nudge with one's mind.

"Are you trying?" Lindell asked. Harry frowned. "You're thinking too physically," she said before he could reply. "Try to clear your mind of logical thoughts. When thoughts do come into your mind, acknowledge them, then let them go, and try to concentrate wholly on the crystal."

It turned out that clearing his mind of logical thoughts was a lot more difficult than Harry had first imagined. For one thing, he kept thinking that he must look rather stupid, or that it was no wonder he'd never done very well with Snape. For another, every time he started to clear his mind, he would think, "Hey! It's working!" realize that that was a thought, and have to clear it as well. After a while, however, Professor Lindell told him to open his eyes.

The smoke within the crystal had indeed receded, leaving the edges clear. "With practice," Lindell said, "you'll be able to center yourself even more. The more you can learn to center yourself, the harder it will be for anyone to break into your mind or control you." She looked at him rather seriously, her eyes earnest as they peered at him through her delicate oval glasses. "And we all know how important that is," she finally said. Harry nodded solemnly.

"Go ahead and borrow that crystal to practice with this week. If you bring me one of your own, I'll enchant it for you next lesson. For now I think you had better be getting to lunch, don't you?" Professor Lindell raised an eyebrow at him and Harry blinked. He glanced over at the window and noticed that the angle of the sun had indeed risen quite high overhead. He couldn't believe how quickly the time had passed.

Feeling decidedly calmer than he had in ages, Harry made his way down to the Great Hall where he found Hermione reading her Ancient Runes text as she ate her stew. He scanned the Ravenclaw table for Gwyn out of habit, but caught himself. He was as bad as Ron or Hermione, he realized; he'd only said a few terse words to her since their fight, yet he found himself looking for her every chance he got. He decided to apologize as soon as the opportunity presented itself.

"How was your lesson?" Hermione asked brightly as he slid onto the bench next to her.

"It was..." he found he didn't quite have the words for the experience, so he settled on, "It was good."

As Harry began dishing himself a bowl of stew, he heard Hermione make an odd growling noise in the back of her throat. Harry looked up and saw Malfoy parading across the Great Hall, his left hand bandaged; a group of Slytherin girls was following him, carrying his books, and hanging on his every word.

"I can't believe he's still here!" Harry grumbled.

Hermione shook her head. "Well, you didn't really think that Hagrid would be able to expel him, did you? Not with Lucius Malfoy walking around a free man." Harry felt his insides begin to burn at the mention of the name. Although the elder Malfoy had done a short stint in Azkaban for his part in the raid on the Ministry, he'd been quickly released on a technicality and the charges against him had been dropped. Harry and the others had never even been asked to give evidence against any of them.

"There's something else I wanted to tell you, Harry," Hermione continued in a low voice. "I was doing some extra research on Gargoyles," Harry rolled his eyes, "and I found out that there are only a handful of spells that have any effect on them at all whatsoever. And Harry, the only spell known to kill a Gargoyle is Avada Kedavra." Harry stared at her.

"Are you saying that Malfoy knows -- and used -- the killing curse?" Hermione nodded a bit fearfully. Harry took a deep breath. "But if you found out about it, don't you think Hagrid and Dumbledore would have come to the same conclusion?"

"Probably, Harry, but I doubt if they could prove it. Malfoy could say that the Gargoyle just died of natural causes or something." She sighed and began stirring her stew thoughtfully. "But if Malfoy has learned to use unforgivable curses, that's really bad. Do you think his father taught him?"

"Most likely," Harry replied sullenly. "He could even be a Death Eater now for all we know."

Hermione sucked in her breath and stared fearfully across the hall at the back of Draco's blonde head. "I knew he was vile, Harry, but to cast an unforgivable curse... It's not easy to do. You have to really want to do it. You have to really want to cause pain or..."

Harry looked away from her, the memory of Bellatrix Lestrange's cackling laughter ringing in his ears. He knew something about what it took to cast an unforgivable curse. Bellatrix had laughed at his attempt and said he didn't have it in him. It was yet another thing he hadn't told Hermione or Ron about that night. He reached up and rubbed his forehead, a twinge of the pain he'd felt earlier returning.

Just then, Ron came running into the Great Hall already dressed in his scarlet Quiddich robes, clutching his broom under one arm and a clipboard under the other.

"Harry! Where have you been? I've been looking all over for you!" he exclaimed, rushing up to the table.

"What are you on about?" Harry asked. "I've been in lessons with Lindell." Ron stared at him somewhat blankly. "Occlumency?" Harry prompted him. Comprehension dawned across Ron's freckled face.

"Oh right. Well come on! You've got to get changed!" Harry gaped at him.

"Why? Tryouts don't start for another hour!" Ron rolled his eyes dramatically.

"Yeah, but we've got to get down and get the pitch ready! You know, get the play boards together, get the balls out of storage, make sure we've got extra brooms for anyone who hasn't got their own..." He looked at Harry expectantly. Hermione looked like she might like to say something, and when Ron noticed, he blatantly turned away from her to exclude her from the conversation. Frowning slightly, Hermione bit her lip and went back to her textbook.

"Ron," Harry said, trying to keep his voice from sounding as annoyed as he was beginning to feel. "I haven't eaten yet and I'm half starved. Let me just have a quick bite and then we'll go down to the pitch, OK?" Grudgingly, Ron assented and dropped down onto the bench opposite.

Unfortunately however, he seemed to have no intention of letting Harry actually eat anything. Every time Harry would try to take a bite, Ron would ask him a question, or show him a new play he'd thought up, or demand his opinion on one of the people signed up to try out. Finally, reaching his breaking point, Harry asked Ron to go up to Gryffindor tower and get his broom for him, to which Ron eagerly assented.

"Thought he'd never shut up!" Harry exclaimed as he and Hermione watched the red-head bounce out of the Great Hall. Hermione opened her mouth almost as though she were going to take up for Ron, but she said nothing. Harry shoveled the last of his stew into his mouth and grabbed a few rolls for his pockets, knowing that Ron would be back in record time.

"Are you going to come down and watch?" he asked. Hermione shook her head.

"I have a double period of Arithmancy this afternoon. But don't worry, Harry, I'm sure you'll do fine." With that, she gave him an encouraging smile, gathered her books, and headed out of the Hall with a little wave. Harry wondered what she meant, *you'll do fine*. Of course he'd do fine.

By the time he and Ron reached the changing rooms, however, he was beginning to feel less certain of that. He barely listened as Ron prattled on and on about which plays he thought they should run and -- for the umpteenth time -- which of the potentials were likely to make the best players. As the two of them carried the crate containing the quaffle, the bludgers, and the snitch out onto the pitch, Harry saw Katie and Ginny walking towards them and felt his stomach go a bit wobbly.

"Oy! Harry!" Katie called waving and smiling brightly as the girls approached. "You ready for today?" Harry nodded and smiled wanly.

"Harry," Ginny said, jogging up to him, "I know you said I could be a chaser, but do you want me to try out with the others? I mean, I'll understand if you do. It's only fair." Ron shook his head.

"Nah, Ginny. You're a shoe-in. You don't have to try out." Ginny turned and gave him a disgusted face.

"When did you become captain?" she asked icily. "Last I heard, *Harry* was in charge." Ron scowled at her and then looked to Harry for support. Harry felt his palms going all prickly and sweaty as he stood between the two Weasleys.

"Er..." he said, noncommittally. Just then, the two beaters, Sloper and Kirke came ambling onto the pitch followed closely by Colin and Dennis Creevy. Dennis was carrying a broom that was taller than he was, and Colin was clutching his camera. They both waved and shouted, "Hiya, Harry!" in unison. The beaters were walking with their heads together, obviously talking about him, and it struck Harry that, with the exception of Katie and to some small extent Ron, he was captain of a team of players he'd never actually played with. Harry found he felt slightly ill. He took a deep steady breath and thought fleetingly of the blissful calm he'd felt only a short time ago leaving Occlumency.

"Go ahead and get changed, Ginny. We can't very well run any plays with Katie up there by herself," Harry said much more firmly than he'd expected to. Ginny nodded, and Ron gave her a

triumphant look. She stuck her tongue out at him and went into the changing rooms with Sloper and Kirke.

One by one, the remaining students on Ron's elaborate sign up sheet appeared until a small group was assembled outside the changing rooms, all looking expectantly at Harry.

"Thanks for coming then," he began uncertainly. "Does everybody have a broom?" The group all nodded silently, and Harry thought that most of them looked about as uncomfortable as he felt, except for Dennis, who was grinning like a madman, and skinny second year boy named Bundy who surveyed his competition with an arrogant smile.

"Right then. Katie here is our lead chaser, so she's going to take you all up and show you a few passing plays, and then we'll give each of you a go at... er... Ron." He felt the color rising to his cheeks as Katie and Ginny smirked at him, and he busied himself getting the Quaffle out of its crate. He tossed it to Katie who took off immediately, leaving four hopeful Gryffindors scrambling to follow her.

"What do you want us to do?" Andrew Kirke asked, swinging his beater's bat through the air.

"Nothing for now," Ron said officially. "You two can just hang about and watch. We'll release a bludger a bit later." Andrew glanced at Harry, shrugged, and wandered off towards the stands where several people had gathered to watch the try-outs, including Colin who was snapping pictures at an alarming rate.

At first, Harry thought he would just watch from the ground, but after several minutes of Ron's running commentary, he mounted his Firebolt and sped off, claiming he wanted a better look at the players. The first rush of wind in his hair made him feel immediately better. He flew a few perfunctory swoops and dives, realizing it had been close to a year since he'd been able to fly, rather than the usual dry spell over summer holidays. It felt good to be up in the air again. He felt free. Glancing over at the group of players, he felt a bit silly for having been nervous earlier. *You can do this*, he told himself. Nothing to it really. Just like leading the DA.

Katie had explained a basic maneuver to the group and they were now trying it in turns, passing the Quaffle to either Ginny or Katie. They seemed to be doing pretty well without any interference from him. Feeling the wind ruffling his hair, Harry let his mind wander. Inevitably, it wandered to Sirius. How could it not? Everything from the Firebolt gripped in his hands to the empty Quiddich stands reminded Harry of his Godfather, and of the fact that he would never again have a chance to see Harry play again...

Harry shook himself back to reality. It didn't do to dwell on things he couldn't change, especially not while he was fifty feet in the air and supposed to be judging a Quiddich tryout. He glanced down at the players below him. Things seemed to be going rather well, and Harry was just contemplating a rather difficult catch that Geoffrey Hooper had somehow managed to pull off, when suddenly, Natalie MacDonald screamed shrilly.

Every muscle in Harry's body tensed, as he grabbed his wand from his cloak, ready to fight. It was then that he noticed a great black bludger pelting after the group of players. Apparently, it had just missed Natalie.

"Sorry!" Jack Sloper yelled brandishing his bat. Harry relaxed a bit and frowned. Andrew was already waiting for the Bludger when it returned, and he smacked it soundly away from the group. Harry looked down and saw that Ron was flying straight for Jack.

"Who said you could get that Bludger out?" Ron demanded hotly. "We're not ready for that yet! You're interfering with my -- I mean, Harry's schedule here!" Harry turned and flew over towards Ron.

"We just wanted a bit of practice," Jack said hotly. "We didn't lob it at them on purpose." Ron puffed himself up importantly.

"It's OK!" Harry yelled quickly so that everyone could hear him. "I was just about to suggest that we have a practice match and see how everyone does against Ron."

"Duck!" Ginny screamed suddenly. Not bothering to think, Harry ducked and the Bludger whistled over the top of his head. Ron turned to look and Jack swung his bat just in time, missing Ron's head by inches.

"KIRKE!" Ron shouted angrily, scanning the skies for the other beater. Harry scowled.

"Ron! Get down to that goal! Katie, you take MacDonald and Creevy, and Ginny will take Hooper and Bundy. Kirke! Sloper! Keep that bloody Bludger away from everybody! I don't want anybody to get hurt!" The group scrambled to follow Harry's instructions, and he flew high above the action to watch.

The resulting "match" was abysmal. MacDonald seemed to have lost her nerve after the Bludger incident and screamed wildly whenever one flew anywhere within ten feet of her. Andrew apparently thought this was rather funny and started lobbing the Bludger in her direction whenever possible, though never actually near enough that she was in any danger of being hit. Dennis Creevy zoomed around the pitch like a humming bird with fantastic speed and agility, but never stayed in one place long enough for Katie to be able to pass to him properly and twice he dropped the Quaffle in his excitement.

Ginny's team seemed to be having better luck. Twice Bundy managed to score while Ron was busy telling off one of the beaters, and Geoffrey Hooper got quite close a third time before Harry shouted at Ron to pay attention. To finish things off, Harry had each of the hopefulets take a penalty shot. Ron blocked them fairly effectively, and only Hooper managed to score. Finally, Harry motioned for them all to land and sent Andrew and Jack off to round up the Bludger.

"Ok, well, thanks for coming out," Harry said to the assembled players. "You guys all flew well. We'll post the results on the notice board tomorrow morning." He watched as the group wandered off back towards the school with expressions ranging from overconfidence, to hopefulness, to downright terror variously written across their faces.

"Well!" Ron said cheerfully, "I thought that William Bundy was pretty good." Katie and Ginny gave him funny looks.

"He's a Quaffle-hog," Ginny said. "He wasn't executing the passes the way we talked about. Every time he got a hold of the Quaffle he just tried to score, no matter what."

"Well, he's the only one who managed to score twice," Ron said defensively.

"That's because you were too busy telling Sloper off to guard the goals," Harry reminded him. Ron turned rather red.

"My team was dismal," Katie said, shaking her head. "I mean, we can hardly have a Chaser who screams every time she sees a bludger."

"And Dennis is fast, but the Quaffle's almost bigger than he is," Harry added.

"He might make a good Seeker," Ginny suggested with a wicked grin.

"That position is taken," Harry reminded her with a wry smile. Jack and Andrew had finally managed to wrestle the bludger back into the crate and they came striding over. Ron scowled at them blackly.

"I thought Hooper flew well," Ginny said. "He's the only one who scored when Ron was actually doing his job." Ron opened his mouth to protest, but Andrew beat him to it.

"No way! Hooper is a whiner. Everyone knows it. If he gets a hangnail he'll probably try to get out of the game. We need somebody we can count on."

"Which is why I think we should have Bundy!" Ron said, exasperated. "Besides, he's got Quidditch in his blood."

"What do you mean?" Harry asked. Ron turned, if possible, even redder.

"His uncle is Klete Bundy." He looked around at them all as if this was supposed to impress them. "He's a beater for the Chudley Cannons." Harry suddenly remembered the name and the fact that Klete Bundy was notoriously arrogant and only rarely accurate.

"'Bludger-Blooter' Bundy?" Jack laughed. Ron scowled.

"Yeah, well... I just thought that he would probably have some experience... You know, playing with his uncle and all..."

"Well," Katie said slowly, "I guess maybe..." Ginny rolled her eyes and crossed her arms. Jack and Andrew were still laughing at "Bludger-Blooter."

"All right!" Harry called, trying to get their attention. "It sounds like it's between Hooper and Bundy. We'll put it to a vote. Who thinks we should have Hooper?" Katie, Ginny and Jack put their hands up. Jack rounded on Andrew, but Andrew shook his head.

"Uh-uh. I can't stand Hooper. I'd rather have the Bludger-Blooter than him," he said.

"Ok, so that's three to two for Hooper," Harry said.

"Wait a minute!" Ron threw in. "You didn't vote, Harry. Who are you voting for?" Harry swallowed hard. He had kind of hoped to avoid voting at all.

"I don't know," he said finally.

"Well, you have to," Ron said quickly. "Your vote counts more than anybody's!" Harry frowned. He trusted Ginny and Katie's instincts, but he trusted Ron too.

"I'll have to think about it," Harry said finally. "Let's go on and get changed."

"Aye aye Captain!" Andrew said throwing Harry a rather elaborate salute. Harry and the others laughed. Ron scowled.

The team quickly changed and headed back up to the castle for dinner, Ron pestering Harry about his vote at every possible turn.

"Those bloody Beaters," Ron sighed later as he poked at his pudding. "Don't give a damn about authority. Did you see the way that Sloper looked at me when I told him he was holding his bat wrong? Acted like I was round the twist. Wonder if insanity is genetic with Beaters, I mean, look at Fred and George, right? They--" Suddenly, Hermione put her fingers in her ears and got up from the table giving Ron a very nasty look, obviously unwilling to listen to any more of his insistent Quidditch prattle.

"What's eating her now?" Ron demanded as he watched Hermione stomp out of the hall. Harry didn't reply. He was about to the point of sticking his fingers in his own ears. He wondered idly if he could think of a charm to make himself go temporarily deaf. "I swear, she drives me crazy sometimes!" Ron continued. "She's too bloody sensitive for her own good."

"She's still mad that you haven't apologized for making fun of her," Harry replied.

"I wasn't making fun of her!" Ron insisted. Harry gave him a rather disbelieving look. "I was just having a laugh," Ron continued defensively. "And if she can't tell the difference, then that's her problem."

"Actually, if you still want help with your Transfiguration essay this weekend, it seems to me it might be *your* problem," Harry countered.

Ron shrugged. "She'll help you and you'll help me. It all comes out in the end." They both fell into silence. But not for long.

"Did I tell you about that save that Bundy -- I mean, Klete, not William of course -- that play he made against Ireland last season? Caught the bludger with the very tip of his bat and sent it straight at Ireland's lead chaser as she made her shot. Managed to actually knock the Quaffle away from the goal in mid air! It was brilliant. Course, everyone said it was a fluke, but--"

"All right!" Harry shouted at last. "All right! Bundy can be on the team."

"That's great, Harry!" Ron said, clapping him soundly on the back. "You won't regret it. He's going to be great, I just know it!" Harry pictured the looks on Ginny and Katie's faces when they heard, and hoped Ron was right.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN -- Calming the Storm

Harry woke early on Saturday morning, hoping to be able to post the results of the tryouts and be out of the common room before the rest of the house was awake. He threw on his tee shirt and jeans from the day before, quietly took out a quill and ink, and went downstairs to write Bundy's name on the roster. As he approached the notice board, however, he saw the name scrawled in an untidy hand and realized that Ron had already beaten him to it. Scowling, he took his quill and added Geoffrey Hooper's name as an alternate. The gesture assuaged his conscience at least a little bit.

"Morning Harry," someone called. Harry jumped. He hadn't noticed Hermione sitting at a table nearby, her books spread out around her, and the remaining space littered with pages of translations of ancient runes.

"How can you be studying already?" he asked, taking a seat across from her. She gave him a patient smile.

"I think Ron was up before I was," she observed, nodding at the roster. Harry frowned.

"I don't know what's gotten into him!" he exclaimed, his frustration from the day before finally finding an outlet. "Yesterday he was trying to take over everything, like he doesn't think I know how to be captain or something. Do you think he's, I don't know, jealous?" Hermione smiled.

"Actually, I think this time it's the exact opposite. He's thrilled for you, Harry; so thrilled, in fact, that he's trying to live vicariously through you."

"Huh," Harry grumbled.

Hermione frowned at him suddenly.

"What's that you're wearing?" she asked, pointing at his shirt. Harry looked down, and realized that, in his rush, he had not tucked his father's amulet into his collar. He quickly grabbed it and stuffed it in his shirt.

"Oh, nothing. Well, I mean, it's something Remus gave me. It was my dad's..." He found he didn't really want to share the amulet with anyone, which is why he hadn't told Hermione or Ron about it before. Hermione gave him a look of surprise.

"Remus?" she repeated. Suddenly, the portrait hole opened and Ron clambered into the common room.

"You're up!" he cried jovially. "Hey, I thought we might want to go down to breakfast a bit early. You know, to avoid the people who didn't make it on the team..." Harry suppressed a sigh and nodded, trying to look cheerful. He stood.

"Are you coming?" he asked Hermione. She glanced at Ron, who was looking around the room at anything but her, and shook her head.

"Oh come on," Harry said impatiently. Reluctantly, Hermione gathered her things together and followed them down. Harry walked awkwardly between Hermione and Ron, and none of them spoke. He considered telling them both off for being idiots when he was distracted by the sight awaiting them in the Great Hall. Although it was still quite empty of people, and much too early for mail, the long house tables were dotted here and there with an assortment of owls. Upon seeing them, Hermione hurried over to the first one. She took the parchment it was carrying and dropped a few sickles into the pouch on its leg.

"Early edition," she said enigmatically as she unrolled the parchment, and then Harry understood. The owls were all trying to deliver *The Daily Prophet*, but most of their recipients were still asleep.

"Look at this!" Hermione exclaimed, turning the front page to show them a large picture of Mad-Eye Moody looking very shifty, his magical eye spinning wildly in its socket.

"What's it say?" Harry asked, dropping onto the bench next to her. Hermione began to read the article out loud.

Murdered Muggle:

Ex-Auror Detained for Questioning

Ex-Auror Alastor "Mad-Eye" Moody, renowned for his extreme paranoia, fixation on security, and tendency to overreact to even the most harmless situation, may finally have taken his obsession too far. According to *Prophet* sources within the Ministry, Moody is being held for questioning in connection with the mysterious murder of a Muggle in Knockturn Alley two weeks ago.

The murder itself was hushed up by the Department of Magical Law Enforcement and only recently discovered by Erin Braugh, *Prophet* reporter. Officially, the Ministry will only confirm that a Muggle was indeed found dead on the morning of 23rd August between Borgin and Burkes and Wormwood's Potables in Knockturn Alley. The Muggle is described as having been dressed as a wizard, but no wand was found on his person. How the Muggle was able to enter Knockturn Alley at all remains unknown.

Unofficially, sources within the Ministry reveal that none other than Mr. Moody himself transported the body to Auror Headquarters where a thorough investigation was begun. According to Ministry insiders, the Aurors identified the man as a Muggle by working with missing person reports provided to them by Muggle "Please-Men."

Moody's version of events, however, does not tally with the evidence. According to a Wizengamot scribe who wished to remain nameless, "Moody claims the Muggle tried to curse him, but we all know that's a load of codswallop, as Muggles can't very well curse anyone, can they?" Since no wand was ever found on the Muggle's person, the claim that Mr. Moody was under attack seems in line with his past litany of far-fetched conspiracy theories.

In fact, if anyone was indeed hurling hexes that day, it is likely that they were aimed at Harry Potter, who was reportedly traveling in Mr. Moody's company at the time. The Ministry denies any connection between the murdered Muggle and The Boy Who Lived.

Sources confirm that Mr. Moody continues to maintain his innocence with regards to the murder, and abides by his story that the Muggle was already dead when he found him in Knockturn Alley. When asked for a statement regarding the allegations, Mr. Moody told this *Prophet* reporter to "get your sorry arse off my front porch if you want to stay attached to your limbs."

Many questions remain unanswered. Why was a Muggle in Knockturn Alley? Why was Harry Potter traveling in the company of such a dubious guardian? And perhaps most chillingly, if Moody's story is to be believed, why would a Muggle want to assassinate The Boy Who Lived?

For accounts of other attempts on Harry Potter's life, see pages 6 & 7 inclusive.

"That's crazy!" Harry exclaimed as Hermione finished reading. "We all saw what happened; that guy was cursing us!"

"Did you actually see him casting a spell?" Hermione asked, pointedly.

"No, but Moody did," Harry replied. "Remember? Mr. Weasley said so."

Ron shook his head in disbelief. "Dad never said anything about the guy being a Muggle! How did a Muggle get into Knockturn Alley by himself?" Ron reached across the table and grabbed the paper from Hermione to look at the article for himself.

"But that's just the point!" Hermione exclaimed. "A Muggle *couldn't* enter Diagon Alley or Knockturn Alley by himself, so someone must have let him in -- probably the same someone who killed him and was trying to curse Moody."

"But Moody said he *saw* the guy," Harry protested. "And he's not likely to make a mistake about that sort of thing -- especially not with that eye of his."

"What really concerns me," Hermione continued, "is that the Ministry was trying to cover the whole thing up. You can bet they know more than this reporter does."

By this time, more people had begun to arrive for breakfast. The students who didn't normally take the *Daily Prophet* were staring at the birds curiously, while the ones who did were eagerly paying for their copies and diving into the article.

"Bet you ten Galleons this 'unnamed scribe' is Percy," Ron spat. "That wanker'll do anything to get in the papers."

"Oh Ron!" Hermione groaned. "Percy apologized to your mum and dad, what more do you want?"

"Just because he apologized doesn't mean he isn't still a wanker," Ron replied. "Fred and George told me that if they ever get Percy alone in a room again--"

Hermione scoffed. "Those two will say anything, Ron!"

Ron's ears began to turn red. "Don't think you can have a go at them just because you're still sore at me for making a little joke!"

"A joke? Is that what that was? It was so vituperative -- I should have realized it was one of your attempts to be funny!" Ron glared at her. "That means mean and abusive," Hermione said scathingly.

"I know what it means!" Ron roared.

"Oh give it a rest, both of you!" Harry cried. Ron and Hermione both turned to stare at him as though they'd forgotten he was there. Harry composed himself. "I'm getting sick and tired of listening to you two bicker like two old marrieds!" He watched with some satisfaction the shock and embarrassment that passed over both faces.

"Harry..." Hermione said suddenly in a completely different tone. She was looking over his shoulder. Harry turned and saw Malfoy approaching from the Slytherin table, clutching a newspaper.

"Oy, Potter!" he called. "You're telling people that *Muggles* are out to get you now?" He laughed at his own joke, and a chorus of snickers erupted from the Slytherins behind him.

"Ignore him, Harry," Hermione hissed.

"Well if one of them is trying to off you, it's a shame he missed," Malfoy added. Harry clenched his fists and turned his back on Malfoy, but it hardly seemed to deter him.

"Honestly though," Malfoy drawled on, "it's too bad that old fraud Moody croaked him. Might have been the only Muggle in history I would have had something in common with."

Harry gritted his teeth and glanced at Hermione, who seemed to be willing him not to pick a fight with Malfoy.

"Harry?" came a concerned voice from behind the Slytherin.

Harry looked up suddenly. Gwyn was approaching them, a newspaper in her hands. She looked upset.

"Don't worry, Gwendolyn," Malfoy said suddenly, dropping his paper and catching Gwyn in his arms as she walked past him. Gwyn froze, her eyes flashing angrily. "I'll protect you from Prissy Potter and his Muggle assassins," Malfoy cooed in her ear. He ran one long manicured finger down her cheek.

Gwyn winced and pulled away from him.

"Take your hands off of me," she said in a low menacing voice. Harry stood up, reaching for his wand as Malfoy laughed casually.

"Aww... I just thought you might like the attention of a real man for once," he leered. Gwyn began to struggle, trying to evade his grasp, but he only pulled her closer.

"Let me go, Draco, or I swear -- I will make you a soprano!" Gwyn threatened, still trying to push away from him.

Malfoy laughed. "I love it when you talk dirty..." he whispered in her ear.

"You heard her, Malfoy," Harry said darkly, aiming his wand at Malfoy's head. "Let her go."

With his arms wrapped around Gwyn, Malfoy had no way of fighting back. He glared at Harry.

"Go ahead, Potter. There's nothing *you* can do that scares me." He squeezed Gwyn even tighter apparently enjoying himself as she groaned in disgust, still fighting against him. Suddenly, Neville appeared behind them, his wand also pointed at Malfoy's head.

"Do what he says!" Neville cried. Malfoy's arrogant smirk faltered slightly, but he didn't budge.

"Harry!" Hermione said suddenly in a warning tone. Harry glanced where she was looking and saw McGonagall entering the great hall. She was walking directly towards them, having exercised her uncanny ability to spot trouble a corridor away.

"What's going on here?" she asked loudly. Quickly, Harry and Neville lowered their wands. With lecherous slowness Malfoy let his hands slide off of Gwyn, who pushed him away with revulsion.

"You can't ignore me forever, Gwendolyn," he said coolly as she stormed out of the Hall.

McGonagall reached them and held each in her stern gaze. No one moved or spoke. "Back to your house tables," she said finally, deciding that nothing punishable had actually happened. With a final

sneer, Malfoy turned and headed back towards the Slytherin table. Gwyn shot a strange look at Harry before disappearing around the corner and up the main stairs.

"Well!" McGonagall barked at Harry and Neville who were still standing, dumbly. "Sit down and eat your breakfast!" She marched away towards the staff table as Harry and Neville took their seats. Neville caught Harry's eye and gave him a solemn nod.

The entire Great Hall was buzzing as people who had seen the confrontation or read the article, now related the story to those who were just arriving. From all around the room curious students turned Harry's way. Harry glanced down the table and saw a very solemn looking Dennis Creevy consoling Natalie MacDonald, who was crying into her kippers, apparently having seen the notice upstairs.

Harry found he was no longer hungry.

"I'm going for a walk," he announced, standing up. Hermione nodded, and she too stood to go. Ron looked momentarily torn between his half-eaten breakfast and his friends, but quickly followed them.

Outside, the grounds were clinging to the last vestiges of summer before the cold wet autumn set in: the sky was brilliantly blue and completely cloudless and the air, while warm enough to be comfortable, felt crisp and clean. The trio headed to their favorite shade tree down by the lake, where Harry promptly slumped against the trunk. Hermione sat down opposite, watching him cautiously as she extracted a book from her bag. Ron ambled over to the lake and began looking for stones to skim. Except for the turning of pages and splash of pebbles, the three were silent.

Harry stared out across the calm water and brooded. Thoughts were racing though his mind at a mile a minute. He wanted to beat Malfoy to a bloody pulp for touching Gwyn. He wanted to burn down the *Daily Prophet* so they couldn't print any more ridiculous stories about him. He wanted to smack Ron and Hermione both for being such idiots to each other -- and unable to do any of it, he leaned back against the tree in defeat.

Something sharp prodded him in the bum. Wincing, he reached into his back pocket and pulled out the crystal that Professor Lindell had given him. He'd completely forgotten stowing it there when he'd left her office. The smoke inside the crystal was swirling and churning angrily, and Harry almost fancied he could see little bolts of lightning going off within it.

"What's that?" Hermione asked, interestedly.

"It's something Professor Lindell gave me to help practice Occlumency," Harry replied, turning the warm crystal over in his hand.

"Mmm," Hermione said, smiling and burying herself in her book once more. Harry considered the crystal again. Clearing his mind didn't sound like such a bad idea really. Closing his eyes, he pictured the crystal and tried to move the smoke. He found it more difficult this time, as images of Malfoy with Gwyn kept popping into his brain. Oh how he wished he could have gotten off one good hex...

What had Professor Lindell told him? To acknowledge the thoughts and let them go. He acknowledged that he would have liked to have cursed Malfoy into the next time zone and tried to let it go. The storm within the crystal quieted a little.

Harry's mind wandered. He was watching the smoke in the crystal get denser and denser in his mind's eye, and all the while he was listening to beautiful music. Beautiful, but so sad... Harry didn't know how long he had been sitting there, but he was startled out of his meditation when he heard Ron say, "Wicked!" He opened his eyes.

Hermione and Ron were both sitting on the grass in front of him, staring at the crystal that lay in his palm. The smoke had coalesced into a ball shape within the crystal. It was still not as compact or uniform as Professor Lindell's had been, but it was definitely an improvement.

"Sorry!" Ron whispered. Harry shook his head slightly and grinned.

"That's OK," he said, stowing the crystal back in his pocket. He felt a lot better. Slowly, however, he realized that he was still hearing the faint sounds of soft, sad music coming from somewhere far across the lake.

"Hey, do you hear that music?" he asked Ron and Hermione. They looked around, listening.

"Just barely" Ron said, straining to hear. "It sounds like crying."

"I don't hear anything," Hermione replied. "It's probably just an Augrey in the forest, though. I'd guess it's going to rain soon." She turned back to her book.

Harry glanced up at the cloudless sky, unconvinced.

"So, Hermione, have you written the Transfiguration essay yet?" Ron asked her. To Harry's surprise she shook her head. They began to discuss the differences between animate to inanimate and inanimate to animate transfigurations, Augreys and arguments forgotten. Harry smiled to himself slightly as he listened to Hermione launch into a full on lecture, and watched Ron listening attentively.

Slowly he got up, motioning for the others to stay put. They were finally getting along again, and he wanted to leave them to it. Besides, he was extremely curious to know where the music was coming from. He began to make his way around the lake; all the while the music grew steadily louder and stronger, vibrating notes seeming to bend the very air. He didn't really pay attention to where he was going, but before he even realized how far he'd walked, he found himself looking at another large shady tree practically on the other side of the grounds. Sitting underneath it, playing a violin, was Gwyn.

The song was hauntingly bittersweet. It echoed off the timeless stones of the castle and rippled out across the lake as he walked towards her. Her back was to him, and as he approached, he could see that her eyes were closed as her fingers worked the strings and drew the bow across them. Listening rapturously, he convinced himself it was a magical instrument because of the way it seemed to draw him in. He stood behind her as she finished. She started to lay the bow down and then jumped as she noticed him standing there.

"Harry!" she exclaimed. "Jeez, you scared me!" She smiled at him, and he went to sit next to her.

"That was beautiful," he said quietly. She shrugged.

"Thanks. I'm glad someone thinks so. My house mates have made it pretty clear that they don't want me practicing in our common room any more, and Padma threatened to transfigure my violin into a pair of earmuffs if I didn't stop playing in our dorm room when she's trying to study -- which is all the freaking time!"

Harry smiled, but sensed quickly that Gwyn didn't think it was all that funny. She looked down at the instrument in her lap.

"I don't know what I'm going to do once the weather gets bad." She gave him a wry smile. "I've heard that English winters are wet and miserable, and neither wet nor miserable is good for a violin."

He nodded. They were silent for a moment.

"Where did you learn to play like that?" Harry asked.

"Private lessons. I've been studying music for years. My dad bought me a toy piano when I was about five, and when I started picking out 'Twinkle Twinkle Little Star' on it, he decided I ought to have lessons." She ran her fingertips along the sinuous curves of the exquisite instrument in her hands. "Music's always been a part of my life. It's like a part of me, actually," she said. "I love it."

It's how I deal. Some people write journals, or paint pictures... or play Quidditch I guess. I make music."

Harry sat back in the grass. He'd never really thought about it, but he supposed Quidditch was a kind of release for him. He always felt better when he was on his broom. If music gave Gwyn that same feeling, he could understand why it was so important to her.

"So, that's twice you've come to my rescue," she said suddenly. Harry shrugged.

"It's no big deal," he said dismissively.

"It's a big deal to me!" Gwyn replied fiercely. "I'm not usually one of those damsel in distress types." She shuddered. "Gawd, Draco is so slimy! I feel like I need to take a bath." Harry laughed. Gwyn carefully laid her violin in the grass next to her and gathered the light black cardigan she was wearing closer about herself. She gave Harry a quizzical look.

"So... what exactly are you doing here?" she asked him, her eyes taking on that slightly hard edge she had so far reserved for Malfoy.

"I heard the music," Harry said simply. She frowned at him.

"And I guess you thought that pointing a wand at Draco's head in my defense somehow absolved you from having barely said two words to me all week?" Harry looked away.

"I was just..."

"Mad? Yeah, I got that. But you wouldn't let me apologize or explain or anything." She shrugged. "I figured you wanted to stay mad, so I quit trying."

"I wasn't mad," Harry said defensively. Gwyn gave him a rather disbelieving look. "Alright, maybe I was a bit," he admitted, "but I didn't want to stay that way. I just didn't know how to make you understand." Gwyn sighed.

"Look, Harry, I didn't mean to make fun of you. It's just, you guys were being so serious... Talking about killing and dying as if it were something you did every day!" Harry looked her straight in the eye. He could tell that she wasn't trying to make fun of him now; she honestly didn't understand what it was like. He wished he could claim that kind of naiveté.

"Well," he said finally. "I've never killed. Or died. Not yet, anyway. But the way things are going, it's only a matter of time..."

She stared at him.

"You really are serious, aren't you?" she demanded. He nodded, not breaking eye contact. She stared at him for a long moment, her eyes searching his. "Why?" she asked finally.

It was the one question he couldn't answer. The one question he barely even allowed himself to acknowledge. It wasn't in his nature to shake his fist at the blank, silent heavens and ask *why me?* He'd learned from a lifetime living with the Dursleys, that going down the paths those kinds of questions led, never brought you anywhere good.

With a deep sigh, he lay back on the grass and stared up at the branches of the tree above them. "There was a prophecy," he said finally, "that said I would be the one to destroy the Dark Lord. It's why Voldemort came after me when I was a baby. It's why he killed my parents and tried to kill me, why he's after me now, and why my friends have to know what it's like to think about killing and dying. It's why I've had to watch two die, why I've had to watch Ron and Hermione get hurt, and why I've been as close to death myself as many times as I have." He paused, staring at the glimpses of blue through the fluttering leaves. He felt lighter, having finally said all of that out loud. He sighed. "But why me? That I don't know."

Gwyn was silent. She ran her fingers over the smooth shiny wood of the violin, lost in thought.

"I'm sorry," she said finally, in a voice barely above a whisper. "I didn't understand." She gave a tiny, ironic laugh. "I still don't; it doesn't make sense. All those deaths over a stupid prophesy?" She shook her head in disbelief. "But I shouldn't have been making fun, and I'm sorry."

Harry nodded, silently. He realized he'd forgiven her almost as soon as it had happened. He was too used to being thought an idiot and a freak to let a little friendly ribbing really bother him any more. *Then why were you avoiding her?* a small voice in the back of his brain asked. *Because you were afraid of scaring her off?*

Abruptly, Harry raised up on his elbow. "Do you still want to be friends, then?" he asked, "I mean, now that you know... who I am and all..." Gwyn's face relaxed into a smile.

"Of course I do, Harry," she said softly. "But I'm afraid I'm going to have trouble seeing you as anything more than that cute guy lying in the grass at the park on Magnolia Crescent, wearing baggy jeans and three year old sneakers."

Harry grinned. He found he could live with that.

"Then come on," he said, getting to his feet, "I've got something to show you."

When they reached the stretch of hallway opposite the tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy, Harry took Gwyn's violin case from her and set it carefully on the floor.

"Where are we going?" Gwyn asked, staring around at the deserted corridor.

"We're here," Harry replied with a mischievous grin. "Remember how you told me you needed someplace to practice your music?" Gwyn nodded, a perplexed smile creeping across her face. "Well, what I want you to do, is to think really hard about the kind of place you'd like to have and walk back and forth in front of this bit of wall three times." Gwyn stared at him disbelievingly, but she took a tentative step forward. She glanced back at him and he gave her an encouraging nod.

Closing her eyes, Gwyn paced slowly back in forth in front of the wall. When she stopped and opened her eyes, an old, white, wooden door had appeared in the stone wall. She gasped.

"That wasn't there before!" she exclaimed. Harry grinned as he picked up her violin case. He went up to the door and turned the knob.

"Ladies first," he said, holding the door open for her. Gwyn took a tentative step into the room and her face shone with pure amazement.

"Harry!" she cried walking into the room. She began spinning around, taking everything in. "Harry! How did you do this?" Harry followed her in and shut the door.

The room was considerably smaller than it usually was when the DA used it for meetings. The walls were painted a pale sea foam green color, and a very old tin light fixture hung in the middle of the room. On one wall was an old, slightly battered looking upright piano. On the other, a shelf covered in books of music. A black metal music stand stood in the center of the room near a small rickety whitewashed table with a chipped pitcher of water and glass on it. But the most startling thing was the window, out of which Gwyn was currently leaning.

Harry set her violin case onto the piano bench and went to look out with her. Although they were on the seventh floor of the castle, and the room was nowhere near an outside wall, the window looked out onto a pleasantly overgrown first floor courtyard filled with tall grasses, ancient gnarled fruit trees and several large bushes covered in yellow flowers. The other buildings he could see were long, low, weather beaten wooden barracks in desperate need of a fresh coat of white paint.

"How?" Gwyn asked, staring out into the courtyard and shaking her head in utter amazement.

"It's called the Room of Requirement. It becomes whatever you need it to be," Harry replied, staring out at the unusual surroundings. "Where are we?"

Gwyn whirled on him, her face a mask of absolute joy. A warm, dry breeze from the window ruffled her hair.

"We're in one of the practice rooms at the Conservatory -- my old school!" She turned back to the window. "It's perfect! Absolutely perfect! It's exactly the way I remember it." Suddenly she flung her arms around Harry and hugged him tightly. "Thank you!" she whispered in his ear, her breath tickling his hairs, "Thank you so much!" A bit dumbfounded, Harry put his arms around her and hugged her back. He was quite disappointed when she broke away to go and look at the piano.

She put her fingers out to the keys and played a chord, and then another. Suddenly, a wicked smile creeping across her face, she played the three highest notes in the keyboard in quick succession. She shook her head.

"Out of tune. Just like the real thing." She turned back to him, her face glowing, her eyes shining. "Thank you, Harry. This is the best thing anyone's ever given me." Harry beamed.

"What are friends for?"

CHAPTER FOURTEEN -- World On Fire

"So where'd you bugger off to all day?" Ron asked as he and Harry made their way back up to the common room after dinner. "Didn't even see you for lunch!"

Harry shrugged and tried to hide the big stupid grin that had remained plastered on his face all afternoon. "Just spent some time with Gwyn. It was her, playing that music down at the lake. She's really good."

Ron smirked at him.

"What about you and Hermione?" Harry added quickly.

Ron's face fell. "What d'you mean, me and Hermione?" he asked abruptly.

Harry made a face. "I mean, are you two speaking again, or what?"

Ron seemed to relax. "Oh, yeah," he replied casually as they climbed through the portrait hole and made their way up towards their dormitory. "Yeah, I guess so. She's off in the library reading up on some obscure charm or other." Ron pushed open the door to their room and found Seamus and Dean sitting on Seamus' bed, their heads bowed close together, looking at something.

"Whatcha got there?" Ron asked. Dean looked up with a huge grin plastered across his face.

"Seamus has got a girlfriend back home," he announced. "He's just been showing me her picture."

Ron grinned. "Let's see then," he said, dropping down on the end of Seamus' four poster. Dean passed him the photograph and Ron studied it, a look of confusion crossing his face.

"What?" Seamus demanded hotly as Ron frowned at the picture.

"She's not moving!" he said, flicking the picture as if to try to provoke it. Seamus snatched the picture back from him.

"Course not!" Seamus retorted starting to turn red about the ears. "'Cause she's a Muggle, isn't she?" Ron's eyes widened as the dormitory door opened again and Neville entered.

"Another Muggle!" Ron exclaimed.

Neville frowned at him. "I am not!" he said.

Harry laughed from his own bed where he was pulling off his socks.

"Not you," Harry reassured Neville. "Seamus' girlfriend." Rather than reassuring him however, this statement seemed to confuse Neville even more.

"What do you mean, '*another* Muggle'?" Dean asked Ron, as he took the picture back from Seamus to have another look. Ron gave a loud sigh and flopped onto his own bed.

"First Harry thought his girlfriend was a Muggle and now --"

"She's not my girlfriend," Harry interjected quickly as Dean passed him the photograph. He glanced down at a snapshot of a rather voluptuous girl with short brown hair, a wide friendly smile, and a prominent Roman nose that was slightly too large for her face.

"Well?" Seamus said anxiously.

"Not bad," Harry said with an encouraging nod as he passed the picture to Neville.

Ron snorted. "Yeah, not bad -- if you don't mind dating a parrot!" Seamus drew himself up and glared at Ron.

"I don't think he was paying much mind to her nose, Ron," Dean quickly said with a laugh. "So come on, Seamus," he continued, "have you seen 'em yet?" By this time, Seamus' face was approximately the same color as the scarlet curtains that hung around their beds.

"Seen what?" he asked defensively.

"Seen what?" Dean repeated. "Those bloody great knockers taking up the entire photo! What d'you think?" Now Neville was also blushing as he handed the picture back to Seamus. Ron sat up in his bed to look over expectantly at Seamus, who was now avoiding all of their eyes.

"Well of course I have," he replied, somewhat unconvincingly.

"Come off it!" Ron said scathingly, but with an eager expression.

"I have!" Seamus retorted with a grin, his face still burning. "She bent over right in front of me to tie her shoe and I saw her bra and -- and everything."

"No way," Neville said in awe, causing the rest of them to laugh. His face turned an even deeper shade than Seamus'.

"That doesn't count," Dean said with a shake of his head. "That was an accident."

"Yeah, well! It's more than you've ever got!" Seamus shot back. "You told me yourself that Ginny wouldn't let you --" Seamus didn't get to finish his sentence because Dean lobbed a pillow at him.

"Shut your bloody trap!" Dean hissed. He glanced warily over at Ron who was beginning to look murderous. "What about you then, Ron?" he asked in a falsely cheerful tone, hoping to redirect the conversation. "Who do you fancy?"

Ron snorted derisively. "No one! Girls make me crazy!"

"One in particular maybe?" Seamus asked with a sly smile. Ron started to blush.

"Who?" Neville asked eagerly. Ron shot him a menacing glare as he turned to undo his shoes.

"You're mental," he insisted. "I don't fancy anyone! But I know who does!" He looked up at Harry with an evil grin. Harry shook his head and gave Ron a warning stare.

"It's the American, isn't it?" Seamus shouted. Ron grinned and Seamus gave a whoop of triumph. "Well done, Harry!"

Harry found the big idiot grin was returning, and there was very little he could do about it.

"Have you kissed her yet?" Seamus pressed.

"Maybe you ought to practice a bit!" Dean interjected. "American birds are fast, you know... She's probably kissed loads of guys." He held up his fist like a hand puppet and started miming as if he were going to kiss it. "Don't want to embarrass yourself."

"Hey, I've had plenty of practice!" Harry retorted, feeling his face getting rather hot.

"That's right," Seamus reminded them, "with Cho. So Harry's kissed Cho, I've kissed Matilda --"

"Her name's *Matilda*?" Ron crowed. Seamus continued unperturbed.

-- Dean's snogged Ginny *loads* of times..." Dean glanced over at Ron, who was frowning disapprovingly.

"No! Not Ginny!" Dean protested. Ron's face contorted into an even darker expression and Dean hastily backtracked. "I mean, yes Ginny... I mean..."

"Which is it?" Ron demanded.

Dean flopped back onto his bed where he was partially hidden by the curtains. "Oh bollocks..."

"So that just leaves Ron and Neville who've never been kissed," Seamus finished.

"I have so been kissed!" Neville protested. They all turned to stare at him incredulously. "I have!" he insisted.

"Your gran doesn't count, Neville," Seamus said with a smirk. Neville made a face at him.

"It *wasn't* my Gran!" he retorted. The others regarded him warily.

"Then who?" Dean demanded.

"And when?" Seamus chimed in. Neville fidgeted uncomfortably with his wand.

"After the Yule Ball," he replied quietly.

"That's rubbish!" Ron spat. "You went to the Yule Ball with Ginny!" Neville gave him a significant look and blushed.

"Yeah, and she kissed me goodnight!" he retorted.

Ron looked absolutely flummoxed. He groaned dramatically and grabbed his pillow, throwing it over his head.

"I don't want to hear any more!" he shouted, the pillow muffling his words. He peeked out from under the pillow and gave Harry a plaintive look. "Honestly," he moaned, "she's going to be the death of me!"

The remainder of the weekend passed in a blur of books and studying. Professor Lindell had promised her N.E.W.T. class a test over their reading, and Professor Snape was threatening to poison the entire class to see how well their antidotes had turned out, not to mention the three foot essay McGonagall wanted on inanimate to animate transfigurations and the Gargoyle research they were meant to be doing for Hagrid.

By Monday morning, the sixth years were all grumbly and tired, as if they hadn't even had a break at all. Hermione was trying not to drip jam onto her Charms text as she read the chapter on mobile illusions (for the third time), which they hadn't even started learning yet. Ron had taken to scowling disapprovingly at Ginny whenever the opportunity presented itself, and Harry was adding the finishing touches to his diagram of a traditional wizard herb garden for Herbology, when a whoosh and a clatter signified the arrival of the post owls. Harry, who rarely if ever received mail, didn't even bother looking up and so was quite surprised when a fat spotted owl landed squarely on his diagram and smudged his Thistlewaite patch.

The owl looked at him expectantly and held out a small brown parcel dangling by a bit of twine from its beak. Harry took the parcel and offered the owl a crust of his toast before it took off again towards the ceiling. At the same moment, a large eagle owl swooped past and dropped a much larger package squarely on Ron's head.

"OW!" he shouted at the bird, who didn't seem to take any notice and swooped out again.

"What on earth is that?" Hermione asked, looking up at Ron, who was now rubbing his sore head.

"Oh, just some stuff from home I expect..." Ron said, examining the box.

"But that wasn't Errol," Hermione said, squinting up at the ceiling. Ron looked uncomfortable.

"Prolly just a post office owl. Errol hasn't been up to long flights lately. I'd er... I'd better take this upstairs before the lesson." Grabbing the box under one arm he somehow managed to shove three whole pieces of bacon in his mouth before dashing to the door.

"What did you get?" Hermione asked, unrolling her copy of the *Prophet* which had arrived with the rest of the post.

"Dunno," Harry replied, sliding the twine off of the package. He unwrapped the brown paper and found something heavy inside wrapped in an old handkerchief. On top of it was a letter. Harry unfolded it and instantly recognized Lupin's loopy scrawl.

Dear Harry,

I mentioned at the train station that I was working on a way for us to communicate without worrying about our owls being intercepted, and here it is, as promised. Your father and Sirius used something similar to keep in touch while serving separate detentions. To activate it, simply speak my name into it, and we will be able to talk.

I look forward to seeing you soon,

Remus

Harry sighed inwardly as he unwrapped the plain square mirror Remus had sent him. It was uncannily similar to the one Sirius had given him the year before, only Remus didn't know about that other mirror. No one did.

Hermione was still waiting for an answer, so he passed her the note.

"Mmm... Clever," she said with approval as she read it. "I never thought of using a-- Harry, are you all right?" Harry ground his fist hard against his burning scar and tried to nod.

"What is it?" Hermione pressed. Harry shook his head, eyes shut, unable for the moment to speak. He didn't know what was happening. A tidal wave of fresh hot grief and guilt had washed over him at the thought of Sirius' mirror, the mirror that, had Harry thought to open it, might have saved Sirius' life. The memory of Sirius's expression of fear and surprise as he fell through the veil and of Lupin's arms holding him back away from it, was suddenly vivid in Harry's mind. A fresh jolt of pain stabbed through his head. Harry groaned.

And then, just as quickly as it had come, it was gone. Harry opened his eyes. Hermione was holding his hand in both of her own. Her face was a mask of concern and fear.

"What did you do?" Harry asked gratefully, rubbing his scar, though the pain had now completely subsided.

Hermione gave him a confused look and shook her head slightly.

"Ahem."

Harry and Hermione both looked up at Ron who was scowling down at them, looking very red-faced and angry. "Am I interrupting something?" he demanded rather more fiercely than Harry thought was absolutely necessary. Hermione quickly released Harry's hand.

"My scar was--" Harry started.

"Right. Well, we'd better get down to Herbology," Ron said quickly turning on his heel and heading for the door.

"Oh dear," Hermione sighed as she shoved her books into her bag. Harry frowned as he took the little mirror and, placing it into a pocket of his satchel, raced after the other two to Herbology. He had no time now to worry about anything now.

As a matter of fact, Harry found he didn't have time to worry about the mirror, his scar, his friends, or much of anything extracurricular for the remainder of the week. Classes at the N.E.W.T. level were, if possible, even harder than they had been in the weeks before the O.W.L. exams. Each and every one of his teachers seemed to be under the impression that theirs was the only lesson he had, and assigned their homework accordingly. By the middle of the week, everyone -- even the ever studious Hermione -- was behind on homework, and Harry found himself hastily flipping through *Advanced Potion Making* at lunch on Wednesday, desperately trying to figure out what poison the antidote they were brewing in Potions was meant to counteract. He suspected Hermione knew, though she wouldn't tell him.

As students began to file out of the Great Hall towards their afternoon classes, Harry sprinted away from Ron and Hermione, who were arguing about Ron's homework planner -- which he had apparently started using to keep Quiddich plays in -- and hurried over to Gwyn at the Ravenclaw table, where she was chatting with Padma Patil and Luna Lovegood. He came up next to her and scooped up two of the books that she had been about to load into her back pack.

"Hurry!" he pleaded. "Before Hermione can catch us up."

Gwyn gave him an odd look, but grabbed her satchel and allowed him to pull her bodily from the Great Hall and down towards the dungeons.

"Please, *please* tell me you know what poison Snape's going to use on us today," he implored. "I've been looking through the book in every spare moment and I still haven't got a clue!"

Gwyn gave him a resigned shrug. "I'm crap at potions, Harry. Padma told me it's probably the Conflagration Colloid because of the feverfew, but Justin thought it was more likely to be a Freezing Draught that freezes you from the inside out." She pulled a cardigan out of her bag. "I brought a sweater just in case."

Harry couldn't help but smile as he shook his head wearily. "I reckon Hermione knows what it is, but she's on her annual 'copying is cheating' campaign and won't tell me." Gwyn grinned.

"She does seem the type..." her voice trailed off as they heard footsteps running down the corridor behind them. Harry turned and saw Hermione sprinting to reach them.

"Are... we... late?" she panted as she fell into step behind them.

Gwyn shook her head.

"Then why were you in such a hurry, Harry?" Hermione asked, looking slightly put out that she'd just run her legs off for no good reason. Harry opened his mouth, trying at the same time to come up with an excuse, but Gwyn beat him to it.

"I was just asking Harry if he'd found out what poison Snape's going to use on us today," Gwyn said with a little smile. "And I told him I haven't a clue. What do you think it is, Hermione? I'd love to know; you're the best in the class, after all..." Hermione began to blush and looked away, murmuring something indistinct. Gwyn grinned at Harry as they entered the Potions dungeon, but the smile was quickly wiped off her face as they saw what was in store for them.

Snape was standing at the front of the room behind a large wooden table that was laden with vials of potions in all different colors and consistencies. Each vial was labeled with the name of the poison it contained. Harry spotted one that was brilliant orange with red flecks suspended in it labeled "Conflagration Colloid," and a little further down, an icy blue one that seemed to be frosting up its glass vial labeled "Freezing Draught." Unfortunately, there were six or seven others to choose from as well.

"You will find your potions exactly as you left them," Snape announced as the class filed into the room. "If you prepared yours correctly, it should have matured nicely. If not, it is most likely a festering cauldron of slop at this point." He looked pointedly at Harry.

"Today I will be testing both your potion making abilities and your capacity for deductive reasoning. Each of you will choose one of the poisons I have assembled here for which you think your potion is the antidote. I will administer a small dose of the poison, and you will then take a dose of your own antidote. If you have guessed correctly, and you have made your antidote correctly, the symptoms will subside. If not..." He paused dramatically. "Well... Let's just hope everyone has done his homework. Line up outside the door."

They all dropped their things at their desks and moved back out into the corridor. Unsurprisingly, Hermione was at the head of the line. Snape regarded her with a sneer.

"I think not, Miss Granger. The rest of the class can't ride in on your cloaktails forever. To the back of the queue please." Harry tried not to groan in disappointment as Hermione, crestfallen, moved to the very end of the line.

Justin Finch-Fletchly was now at the head of the line, and Snape let him into the classroom, slamming the door shut behind him. A few moments passed, and then suddenly, Snape's voice startled them all by saying "Next!" through the door. Pansy Parkinson was next in line, and she looked rather anxious as she tugged open the door and entered the dungeon.

An eerie silence fell over the class as one by one they were called into the room. None of the students already tested returned. When Gwyn's turn came, she took a deep steady breath, and Harry tried to give her an encouraging smile as she entered the room.

Finally it was Harry's turn. He yanked open the classroom door and entered. He glanced over at his classmates where they stood by their cauldrons. Justin's lips had turned blue and Gwyn had already donned her cardigan and was hugging her arms around herself, a morose expression on her face. Harry guessed that they had both chosen the Freezing Draught. Pansy had her mouth open and was whimpering and fanning her tongue ridiculously, as though she had just eaten a very hot chili pepper. Phillip Fontaine was slumped over his desk. He was sweating profusely, but otherwise seemed none the worse for wear.

"Eyes to the front, Potter!" Snape snapped testily. Harry frowned. His instincts told him to go with the Conflagration Colloid, but he still wasn't sure. Several other poisons with delightful names like

Searing Solution and Draught of a Thousand Daggers also sprang to mind. None of them sounded terribly pleasant. He frowned at the table.

"If you are too unsure of your own antidote to make a choice," Snape drawled nastily, "I suggest you take your zero and let the rest of your classmates have their turn." Harry glared up at him. He pointed at the Conflagration Colloid and Snape narrowed his eyes. Harry thought momentarily of how horrified Moody would be at the thought of voluntarily allowing someone to poison him as he opened his mouth. Slowly and deliberately, the Potions Master measured out three drops of the liquid onto Harry's tongue.

The effect was instantaneous. It felt as though all the fluids in Harry's body had suddenly begun to boil. Beads of sweat broke out all over his skin, but rather than cooling him, they burned as they ran down his scalp, his neck, his back and face. He heard Gwyn gasp as he stalked, half blind with the pain, over to his own cauldron. His hands were shaking as he tried to ladle out a dose of the antidote, and he spilled it, watching in fascinated horror as small streams of flame rolled off his own hands into the cauldron and burned little holes in his robes. Gwyn hurried over and, still shaking herself, measured out a dose of the potion into a glass to give to Harry. Harry took it gratefully and swallowed. He stared at the backs of his hands as the fires hissed and steamed and slowly put themselves out. He felt completely numb.

Harry watched the rest of the class suffer similarly. Malfoy initially pointed at the Freezing Draught but then, at a look from Professor Snape, changed his mind and chose the Conflagration Colloid. Snape only gave him one drop, and while he did look rather hot, he never burst into flames. Padma and Hermione also both chose the Conflagration Colloid, and Hermione was crying tears of fire by the time she got to her cauldron where Harry was already waiting for her with a glass of her antidote.

When everyone had been tested, Snape came around and collected vials of everyone's antidote for analysis before dismissing them. "Potter! Granger! I want a word!" he barked as the rest of the class stumbled out of the room. Gwyn shot Harry a glance that said she would wait as he and Hermione headed towards Snape's desk.

As the last of the students exited the classroom, Snape glared at them both with his steely eyes.

"I thought that after five years under my tutelage you would have realized that I do not tolerate cheating!" he intoned menacingly. "I have therefore decided to render both of your marks as zeros for the day in the hopes that the message might be more clearly received!" Hermione gaped at him.

"We weren't cheating, sir!" she insisted. "I swear, I didn't tell Harry which poison to --"

"Do you honestly expect me to believe that?" Snape demanded. Hermione's lip trembled. "You have been helping Potter since the very first day you set foot in my classroom and I will not tolerate it any longer! From now on you will not sit together, and if I have even the slightest reason to suspect that you have been helping him again, you will *both* be expelled from this class. Do I make myself clear?"

Choking back tears, Hermione nodded. Harry just stared, stony faced at Snape. He knew he hadn't done anything wrong, and he suspected Snape knew it too. For a moment, the Professor met his gaze. His eyes narrowed as if daring Harry to question his authority.

"May we leave?" Harry asked, his voice icily calm. Snape nodded brusquely and Harry grabbed Hermione's arm and led her out of the dungeon.

Just outside the potions classroom, Gwyn was ducking away from Malfoy, whose expression appeared, though Harry never would have admitted it, contrite. Gwyn quickly stuffed a piece of parchment into a pocket, and hugging her arms around herself, hurried over to Harry. "What happened?" she asked.

Hermione looked like she might be in shock. Her eyes were wide and unfocused, and she was chewing on her lip. "Zero..." she muttered in disbelief.

"Snape was being his usual subhuman self," Harry answered Gwyn dully. "He accused us of cheating and gave us both zero marks for the project."

"But you didn't cheat!" Gwyn cried turning back towards the dungeon. "I'll go back and tell him--" Harry caught her arm and shook his head.

"It won't do any good. Don't waste your breath."

Gwyn frowned darkly, then noticed Hermione. "Are you all right?" she asked.

Hermione was busy trying to look nonchalant as she wiped tears from her eyes.

"Fine," she replied sharply. "I'll see you at dinner..." She turned and hurried away up the corridor. Harry started to follow, but Gwyn put out a hand to stop him and shook her head. He could feel her fingers like little blocks of ice right through his robes.

"You're freezing!" he exclaimed.

"Hence the name 'Freezing Draught,'" she replied., grabbing his hand and wrapping his arm around her shoulders as they began to walk up the corridor. "Real nice of Snape to give all of us the correct antidotes, wasn't it?" she asked facetiously. Harry agreed as he chanced a glance behind them and saw Malfoy still standing outside the classroom, his expression now cold and unreadable.

"I could do with a drop of that Conflagration potion right about now." Gwyn teased, as she hurried him forward. But she was right. Harry could feel how icy cold she was through her robes and cardigan. She shivered next to him all the way back to the Great Hall.

By Friday, Harry was so exhausted from classes and staying up nights working on schoolwork that he could barely remember his own name. He was certain he'd failed Lindell's test, not having understood or therefore remembered much of the reading; and he hadn't even managed to make his pencil move in Transfiguration, let alone turn it into a worm as he was supposed to have done. Both of those failures had earned him extra homework.

Feeling like a zombie, Harry was halfway to Lindell's office before he remembered that he was supposed to have brought a stone or small object to this Occlumency lesson, for Lindell to enchant. Cursing silently, he raced back to the dormitory and started casting desperately around the room for something -- anything -- he could use as a Centre. Frantically he started digging through his trunk; there, at the very bottom, he found the purple crystal Tonks had given him for his birthday. Muttering a blessing on Tonks' strange pink head, he dashed back down to Lindell's office, panting for breath as he knocked on her door.

"Yes?" she called tersely, and, taking that as an invitation, he cautiously opened the door. Professor Lindell seemed to have done a bit of rearranging since Harry had last visited. Her large desk was missing, and in its place was a sturdy looking work table. Sitting on the table were innumerable rolls of parchment in various states of completion, a bubbling cauldron suspended over a bell jar of blue flames, and beside that, what looked suspiciously like a tray of take-away curry. In the center of the table, a large white rat was curled up and sleeping peacefully.

"*Stupefy!*" Professor Lindell muttered at the rat without turning to see who had entered her office. The spell's aim was true, but rather than stunning the rat, it seemed to encounter a kind of bubble around the creature which illuminated blue when it was hit. The energy of the spell dispersed all around the bubble and then disappeared, but had no effect on the rat, which merely snorted in its sleep and wiggled into a more comfortable position. Lindell grabbed her quill from the ink pot nearby and began scribbling in a well worn leather notebook propped open on the table. It was so full of other scraps of parchment and notes that stuck out from between the pages that it looked vaguely as though it had exploded at some point and been inexpertly reassembled. Harry cleared his throat, wondering if she remembered that he was there.

At the sound, Lindell whirled around glaring at the source of the interruption, her eyebrows rose in surprise as she recognized him, and then fell again in consternation. "Mr. Potter," she said finally. "It's Friday. I completely forgot."

Harry smiled a little, glad to see he wasn't the only one having a busy week.

"That's OK," he said quickly. "I can come back another time if..."

"No. No, I'm sorry. Come in." She looked around the room suddenly and seemed to realize that there weren't any chairs. Flicking her wand carelessly, she conjured up two battered leather wingbacks facing one another near the table. Harry moved over and dropped into one, still staring at the curious detritus littering the tabletop.

"Er, Professor..." he said as she puttered about, clearing things from the table, and rolling up various scrolls. "What were you doing to that rat just now?"

Lindell smiled, and for the first time, Harry thought he saw genuine warmth in her expression. "I've developed a new type of shield charm that is self-sustaining," she said, glancing over at the rat which was now scratching itself behind the ear with one foot. She pointed her wand at it and muttered "*Citro*," and the strange bubble around the rodent glowed blue again momentarily and then seemed to disappear. She scooped the rat up and dumped it into a small cage on her shelf before sitting down. "You saw what happened when I cursed it?"

Harry nodded. She smiled again.

"Rather good, wasn't it?"

Harry grinned. "Brilliant," he agreed.

She took a deep breath as though to bring herself back to the task at hand. "Right," she said. "Occlumency. Have you been practicing with the Centre?"

Harry nodded and dug into his pocket, producing the white crystal she had given him and the purple one that he had retrieved from his room. She took them both.

"Don't tell me you've been to Albania?" she asked, raising an eyebrow as she dangled the purple crystal from its strap. Harry shook his head.

"It was a gift from a friend," he said sheepishly. "Is it... OK?" Lindell nodded.

"It will take some time to enchant it, so I will return it to you next week. How did your meditation go?"

"Pretty well, I think," Harry said truthfully.

Lindell handed him the white crystal again. "Show me."

Harry took the crystal and closed his eyes. He found he was so exhausted that it wasn't hard to clear his mind and when the Professor told him to open his eyes, the smoke had receded into what he thought was a respectable sized ball.

"Very good," Lindell said, approvingly. "Now, if you feel ready, Mr. Potter, I would like you to try to repel an attack."

Harry nodded slowly. He didn't feel too keen on letting anyone go mucking about in his head, but he knew it was for his own good.

Lindell took up her wand. "Concentrate on keeping a clear head and a centered mind," she instructed him. "Just as you move the smoke in the crystal, push me away from your thoughts. Ready?"

Without waiting for an answer, Lindell pointed her wand at him and said, "*Legilimens*."

Harry felt a slight jolt and closed his eyes involuntarily. He saw himself surrounded by his friends at his birthday party a few months ago; Hagrid was waving to him at the Hogsmead station as he disembarked from the Hogwarts Express; Gryffindor was winning the Quiddich cup and all of his friends were cheering. Harry was confused. He tried to remember what he was supposed to be doing. Instead, he saw Hagrid handing him the photo album he'd made for him, Fred and George and Ron hovering in the Ford Anglia outside his bedroom window, and Gwyn leaning over him in the play park, brushing back his fringe...

Harry felt heat rise to his face as he realized that Professor Lindell was seeing the memories too, and he quickly tried to think of anything other than Gwyn. With a strange feeling of release, the deluge of memories stopped. Harry opened his eyes.

"What was that?" he asked, feeling disoriented.

Professor Lindell raised an eyebrow at him. "That was me, entering your mind using Legilimency," she said slowly, as if that should have been obvious.

Harry frowned. He remembered Occlumency being a much more painful lesson than this. "But the memories... They were all good."

The Professor looked at him curiously. Harry fumbled over his words, trying to explain. "When Snape -- Professor Snape, I mean -- whenever he... I always saw bad memories, things I didn't want to remember... Things I didn't want him to see and..." He trailed off as he glanced up at Lindell, whose face had gone very white.

"Only bad memories?" she asked in a pinched voice. Harry nodded, relieved that he'd been able to get his meaning across despite his lack of eloquence. A muscle in Professor Lindell's jaw tensed. Harry swallowed, realizing that his throat was suddenly very dry.

Professor Lindell was pensive, studying him with an odd look on her face that was perhaps a mixture of anger and pity. Harry reached up and rubbed the bridge of his nose tiredly. Even though the memories hadn't been painful, he still felt as though someone had been poking around in his head with their foot.

"Did you tell Professor Dumbledore about this?" Lindell asked quietly, jogging Harry from his reverie.

Harry frowned as what she was saying penetrated through the fog. "Should I have done?" he asked.

Lindell got up and began to pace with her arms folded over her chest. Her eyes were dark and angry.

"Do you mean," Harry asked, as the new realization began to stoke the anger within him, "that you can choose what kind of memories to look for?"

Lindell gave him an affirming glance, her brows knit in consternation. Harry took a deep breath. "Then, Professor Snape was making me relive all that stuff on purpose?" he demanded.

"It certainly seems that way," Lindell spat angrily.

Harry clenched his fists in hatred. He'd always thought that was just how Legilimency worked; that to break down his victim, the Legilimens would make him relive his worst memories. Only now did Harry realize that it would be a much more useful tool if one could *choose* which memories to view.

Quite suddenly, a flash of pain seared across Harry's forehead and behind his eyes, but he barely felt it at all. All he could think of was how desperately he hated Severus Snape for making him relive all his worst memories, and how the bastard had probably enjoyed every minute of it.

"Mr. Potter," Professor Lindell said sharply. Harry glanced up at her. "I would like you to go back to your dormitory and meditate for the rest of our hour. Your mind is clearly in need of quieting."

Harry glanced down at the crystal still lying on his knee and was impressed with the degree to which the storm within was boiling away.

"I can understand that you are feeling very betrayed right now, as well you should be," Lindell continued levelly, her grey eyes flashing with anger. "Professor Snape had no right to violate your mind the way he did, and you can rest assured that I will speak to both him and Professor Dumbledore about this."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN -- The Sect of the Serpent

Harry stormed back up to Gryffindor tower, his rage all consuming, overwhelming his senses. Oblivious to the sights and sounds around him, all he could see was the sneering countenance of his weedy Potions Master, laughing as he made Harry relive all of his worst memories.

Harry shouted the password at the Fat Lady, who was so shocked by the look on his face that her pithy rejoinder died on her lips. Someone called out to him in the common room, but Harry could not have cared less. He raced up the stairs to the dormitory and threw open the door, slamming it loudly against the wall and even more loudly shut behind him. Luckily, the room was empty; the windows had been thrown open to encourage warm autumn breezes, and the hangings around the five matching beds swayed and fluttered gently in the wind.

Harry forced himself to take a deep breath as he flopped down, face first, onto his bed. He opened his fist to reveal Professor Lindell's Centre. It had left deep red impressions in his palm from where he'd been clenching it so tightly, and the smoke within looked like the aerial photographs he'd seen of a hurricane. He knew he should concentrate on trying to clear his mind, but the bitter vitriol coursing through him was so intense that he could think of nothing more than what he would like to say and do to Severus Snape.

After several minutes of attempting to meditate and making absolutely no headway, Harry gave up in frustration, and chucked the Centre across the room. It clattered and rolled noisily under Neville's bed. Harry threw himself back against the pillows and stared up at the ceiling, thinking back to his Occlumency lessons the previous year. He remembered the look of pure hatred Snape had worn when he'd discovered that Harry had been looking in the Pensieve. *How dare he? Harry silently demanded. How dare he look so hateful when he'd been having a jolly old time watching my worst memories all year!* He gritted his teeth as he stared.

A large black spider scuttled across the folds of the canopy of Harry's bed. He frowned at it and a strange, high, screeching voice popped unbidden into his head. *"You have to mean it..."*

Harry grasped his wand from his back pocket and pointed it at the spider. He narrowed his eyes and tried to picture Snape's face on the black body of the insect. His body tensed as he thought the incantation...

"Avada..."

"Harry Potter," called a muffled voice into the room.

Harry stopped in mid breath and dropped his wand arm, suddenly ashamed of what he'd been about to do. His head was throbbing in time with the beating of his heart, each pulse sending a stabbing pain through his scar. He hadn't really noticed it until now.... Sitting up suddenly and looking around, he tried to place the voice he'd just heard calling his name.

"Harry? Hullo? Harry, are you there?" Staring around the room wildly, Harry realized whose voice he was hearing.

"Remus?" he called uncertainly. He jumped off the end of his bed and stared around the empty dormitory.

"Harry! In the mirror!"

The mirror! Harry rushed over to his bed side table where he'd stowed the mirror earlier in the week and subsequently forgotten about it. Grabbing the little square of glass in his palm, he sank onto the bed and was slightly disconcerted to find, not his own reflection, but the tired, worn face of Remus Lupin filling the little wooden frame.

"There you are!" Remus said with a chuckle. "I was beginning to wonder whether or not the owl ever made it to Hogwarts." Remus' smile quickly faded. "What's wrong, Harry?"

"That effing bastard Snape!" Harry growled. If Remus was shocked by Harry's language, he did not let on. Harry launched into the diatribe that had been building since the revelation in Lindell's office, telling Remus everything.

"And he had the nerve -- *the nerve* -- to get mad at me for looking at his memories, when he'd been mucking about with mine all term!" Harry realized he was shouting, but he didn't care. "He made me relive it all on purpose! Everything! The Dementors, Dudley beating me up as a kid, Cedric, the graveyard, my Mum screaming..." A muscle twitched in Remus' jaw, but Harry continued unabated.

"And all those bloody nightmares. He was laughing at me the whole time, Remus. I know he was," Harry finished, his anger finally having spent itself into a dull roar. He had been pacing back and forth across the empty dormitory and now, feeling drained, he sunk down onto the end of the bed.

Looking up through tired eyes, Harry saw Ron for the first time, sitting on the end of his own bed, staring silently at him, eyes wide with rage and disbelief. Harry hadn't even heard him come in.

"How long have you been here?" he demanded harshly.

"Long enough," Ron replied, his voice a bit shaky.

"Who's there, Harry?" Remus asked, looking concerned.

"It's just Ron," Harry said, slightly put out that Ron had overheard as much as he had, without Harry even noticing. Harry held up the mirror so Ron and Remus could see one another. Ron smiled weakly.

"Harry," Remus prodded, unwilling to be distracted, "did you tell anyone what was going on? Ron? Hermione?"

Harry scowled, looking back down at the mirror, and shook his head.

"I... I thought that's just how it was supposed to be. I mean, if Voldemort were trying to break into my brain, I didn't expect it to be pleasant, did I?" Remus was silent, as though considering his next words very carefully.

"Perhaps he believed he was acting in your best interest, Harry."

Harry stared at him in disbelief. "How could listening to my Mum be murdered over and over again possible have been for my own good?" he demanded. He didn't wait for Remus to answer. "How can you defend him? *He's* the reason Sirius is dead!"

Remus' calm demeanor wavered for a moment. "Harry..." he began.

"No!" Harry cut him off. "He is. The dreams were always worse after lessons with him. Making me see all those terrible things again and again only made me *weaker*, Remus! It's his fault I couldn't block out the nightmares! It was all stupid, bloody, Snape's fault."

Remus put his hand across the bridge of his nose in a weary gesture. "Professor Snape..."

"Fine. Stupid, bloody, greasy *Professor Snape's* fault."

Across the room, Ron sniggered. Harry ignored him.

"Harry, whatever else he may be, Professor Snape is the reason that you're *not* dead, or had you forgotten that? He's the one who figured out what had happened and sent the rest of us to help you."

"I wish he hadn't," Harry muttered bitterly.

Remus stared at him. "Don't say that!" he said harshly, in a voice very unlike his own. He banged his fist on the table, and from the resulting crash, Harry guessed he'd sent a load of crockery tap dancing across the room.

"Don't even think that! Harry, you're too important... Sirius knew that and -- believe it or not -- so does Professor Snape."

"I don't want to be important!" Harry shouted back, goaded by Remus' uncharacteristic show of emotion. "I don't want people to die for me or because of me -- and don't say he didn't! I don't want to--" He faltered, glancing at Ron. He had been about to say *I don't want to kill...* "I don't want any of it!" he finished instead.

Remus took a deep steadyng breath. "I know you don't," he said finally, his calm facade back in place, as if his impressive control had never broken. "But you can't live your life in denial. And you can't bring him back by arbitrarily picking someone to blame."

Harry scowled and looked away from Remus' obstinately logical face. He didn't enjoy feeling so transparent in his wrath; he preferred the warm comfort of righteous indignation.

"You can't waste your life on hate, Harry; it's far too precious for that. Take it from someone who knows."

Harry couldn't meet Remus' eyes. He found it hard to believe that the serene man knew how to hate, but as soon as he thought it, a memory surfaced of the cold hard stare he'd seen Remus wear the year they'd first met, whenever anyone mentioned the name Sirius Black...

"Besides," Remus said suddenly, his entire tone changing, "look what it does to a person. You want to end up looking like Professor Snape? Or have grey hair by thirty, like me?" Harry snorted reluctantly, his eyes finally traveling back to meet Remus'.

"I'm sorry," he said finally. He gave another ironic little snort. "I seem to be saying that to you a lot, lately. I swear, I'm not normally this much of a prat."

"Yeah you are," Ron retorted from where he still sat on his own bed. Harry glanced up at him, having completely forgotten he was there.

"Shut up Ron," Harry grinned, and so did Remus.

"This Professor Lindell," Remus continued in a much lighter tone, "she seems to know what she's doing. Do you feel like you're learning anything from her?"

"Yeah," Harry replied, "yeah she's all right. A bit stodgy, but she knows her stuff I reckon. She's a hell of a lot better than Snape at any rate."

Lupin nodded.

"What about you?" Harry asked suddenly. "I mean, you didn't know about all this when you called. What's going on with you? With the Order?"

"Not much," Lupin said almost bitterly. He shook his head slowly and gave a hollow little laugh. "I'm beginning to have a lot more sympathy for the tantrums Sirius was forever throwing. Being alone in this house is..." He paused and regarded Harry with tired blue eyes. "I'm sure you felt it. He's here. Pieces of his life are everywhere, everywhere I look, you know?"

Harry nodded. He did know. He'd spent the entire summer thinking he'd caught a glimpse of his godfather disappearing around a corner just in front of him, or hearing his laugh in a crowded room, or waking in the morning with the momentary expectation of seeing Sirius standing over him. His mind wandered back to the moments he'd shared with Remus in Buckbeak's room at the top of the house at Grimmauld Place, and he couldn't imagine what it would be like to have to be there all alone.

"In the interests of keeping my sanity intact, I've volunteered to go undercover for the Order," Remus continued. He smiled conspiratorially. "It'll be like old times; see if I've still got the right stuff. But I wanted you to know, before I left."

Harry frowned slightly. "What do you mean undercover? When? Where?"

"If I told you that, Harry," Remus replied. "I might have to kill you."

Harry rolled his eyes.

"Dumbledore's orders," Remus said with a shrug. "He and I are the only ones who know where I'll be, and he wants to keep it that way..." He trailed off at the look of disgust on Harry's face and sighed. "It's only the two of you in the room?"

Harry nodded.

"All right, but don't let on that you know. I am going to attempt to infiltrate the Sect of the Serpent."

Harry frowned, trying to remember where he'd heard the name before. "That's the group Dumbledore was afraid was going to join up with Voldemort, isn't it?"

Remus nodded.

"But who are they? What are they?" Harry pressed. "No one ever explained..."

"Snakes are used in many dark rituals, and parts of snakes -- their skin, their venom -- are used in many different kinds of dark potions," Remus began. Harry smiled a little to himself, hearing Remus slipping into his Professor Lupin voice. "Live snakes, and their skins in particular, are components of Youth potions, and believed to be the key component of the ever-elusive Eternal Youth Spell. That's what Dumbledore believes the Sect of the Serpent is after."

Harry snorted. "Doesn't sound all that evil to me," he said.

"Just a bunch of old fogies trying to stay young," Ron piped up.

"It may not sound that bad," Remus replied with a wry smile, "but Youth spells are notorious for their complicated and rather ghastly side effects. Age is the accumulation of events on our bodies, and that accumulation has to go somewhere if a spell is to give you true youth, not just the illusion of it. That's where the dark magic comes in, ridding the soul of the impurities and vices that lead to age."

Harry shook his head, trying not to picture what the impurities and vices of accumulated age would look like once removed. "What does any of that have to do with Voldemort?" he asked.

Ron spoke up again, clearly trying to impress his former professor. "Well, he'd fit right in with a group like that, wouldn't he? He's always been obsessed with immortality, right? And eternal youth seems like a pretty good step in the right direction."

"Exactly," Remus agreed. "The group is comprised of powerful wizards whose dubious morals would appeal to Voldemort, but we don't really know what their relationship is, or if they've made any kind of alliance. That is why I'm going to try to join them."

"If all goes to plan I should be in and out in a few weeks, months at the most. But that's why I wanted to get this mirror to you now. I want you to be able to contact me if you need anything."

Harry nodded.

"I'll be traveling under a false surname, but I'll keep Remus, so just call my first name to activate the mirrors. And Harry..." His face became suddenly grave again. "I don't want you getting some stupid notion of not calling me. If anyone is harassing you, or you have any more dreams, if your scar hurts, or anything at all really, I want you to know you can tell me, alright?" Harry realized that Remus knew him far too well. He smiled slightly.

"I can call you for good stuff too, right? Like when we murder Slytherin at Quidditch?" Remus smiled broadly.

"You'd better," he said warmly. "And Ron, keep him out of trouble, will you?" Ron grinned at Harry from across the room, but then Remus laughed. "Wait a minute... Strike that. I've met your brothers!" Ron scowled good-naturedly.

Remus' face settled back into a slightly pensive expression. "You will stay in touch, won't you Harry?" he asked, and Harry was struck by how timid he almost sounded. He gave a little laugh to cover his surprise.

"Course I will," he said warmly.

"Good," Remus said firmly. He smiled. "See you 'round, Harry."

"See yer, Remus," Harry responded. The image in the mirror began to waver, and then Harry found himself staring at his own reflection. He was a little surprised to see that his eyes were rimmed red and looked as though he hadn't slept in a week.

He glanced over at Ron who was still sitting there, staring at him. "So," he said, a statement more than a question. "You heard everything."

"Most of it, yeah," Ron replied. "I came up to see what the bloody hell you were shouting at yourself for." He gestured over to the mirror in Harry's hands. "Useful little toy you've got there," he added. Then suddenly he pounded his fist into the bed. "I don't understand what Snape's got against you!" he said.

Harry sighed. "Apparently, he and my dad pretty much just wanted to hex each other off the planet when they were at school, but then Dad died, and all Snape had left to use for a punching bag was me."

Ron snorted. "Well, that's Snape for you: doesn't even have the brains to come up with an original reason for hating someone."

Harry shrugged. He felt exhausted, and he didn't really want to talk about it any more. That was becoming a habit with him -- not telling his friends how he was really feeling -- but he could hardly feel remorseful about it. He simply didn't have the energy.

"Gar!" Ron yelled suddenly, leaping up from the bed and staring at the floor. "Spider!"

Harry saw the large black spider momentarily before it disappeared under Ron's shoe with a sickening crunch.

"Take that, you nasty bugger!" Ron shouted passionately, grinding his toe into the floor.

Harry found he felt rather ill.

Despite his best efforts, Ron was unable to convince Harry to go down for lunch or even to leave the dormitory. When hunger finally overcame Ron's maternal instincts, Harry found himself gratefully alone, drew the hangings around his bed, and lay back in the cool dark cave of his bed, the exhaustion of the week and of railing uselessly at his betrayal having caught up with him.

He closed his eyes for a moment, and found himself with Gwyn in the play park on Magnolia Crescent. They were sitting in the grass under the shade tree, and Gwyn was going to teach him how to play her violin. He was holding the instrument and running his fingers over the curves of it, enjoying himself completely.

Abruptly, however, Gwyn took back the violin and stood, telling Harry that only normal people could play it. She snatched up the bow and began to walk away. Harry called after her, asking what he had to do to be normal, and she told him to throw away his wand. Obediently, Harry removed his wand from his back pocket and tossed it into a nearby waste bin. He thought Gwyn would give him back the violin after that, but instead, she only handed him the bow.

Suddenly, Gwyn was gone, and Harry was standing in the alley between Magnolia Crescent and Privet Drive. It had grown very dark and very cold, and Harry knew that the Dementors were coming after him again. He reached for his wand, but all he had was the violin bow. Desperately, he pointed the bow at the darkness, but nothing happened.

Fear overtook him, and Harry began backing into a corner. He watched the darkness warily for the Dementors he knew were there but couldn't see. Suddenly he felt a hand on his shoulder.

Harry grabbed the hand and snapped his eyes open with a start. Hermione was standing over him, looking concerned.

"What the--"

Hermione stood back as Harry released her wrist and sat up. He was in his own bed in the dormitories, and Hermione and Ron were looking down at him anxiously.

"All right there, Harry?" Ron asked cautiously.

Harry blinked several times, trying to clear his head of the strange dream. "Yeah," he replied groggily. "I was having a weird dream... How long have I been asleep?"

"You missed dinner," Hermione said. "But Ron and I saved you some." She smiled and pointed to a plate on his bedside table covered with a napkin, and Harry realized that he was ravenous.

"Thanks," he said heartily, reaching for the plate. Hermione perched gingerly on the end of Harry's bed, and Ron sat down heavily on his own opposite them.

"What were you dreaming about?" Hermione asked carefully as Harry shoved half a roll into his mouth.

"Mmm? Oh. Nothing really." Harry chewed thoughtfully as he watched Hermione. She was blatantly avoiding his gaze. Then he glanced over at Ron, who quickly looked away, and swallowed hard.

"So I'm guessing Ron told you then?" he asked, only a touch of bitterness creeping into his voice.

"Oh Harry, why didn't you *tell* someone if it was that awful?" Hermione exclaimed, apparently just waiting for an entrée into the subject. "I'm sure Dumbledore wouldn't have wanted you to suffer and--"

"It doesn't matter," Harry said bluntly. "It's over. It's done, just one more good reason to hate Snape."

Hermione stared at him and shook her head. "Why do you do that, Harry?" she asked quietly.

Harry frowned at her over his mashed potatoes. "Do what?"

"Keep everything inside, bottled up. Why don't you tell us when something is bothering you? Don't you trust us?"

"Of course I trust you!" Harry exclaimed. "I trust you and Ron more than anybody."

"But not enough to tell us what's been bugging you since last term," Ron put in sullenly. Harry stared at him. "And don't tell us it's Sirius," Ron continued, "'cause it's more than that."

Harry huffed. "When did you two start studying Legilimency?" he asked dourly.

"We're your friends, Harry," Hermione said simply. "We hardly need Legilimency to tell when something's bothering you."

Harry frowned down at his half-eaten dinner. A part of him desperately wanted to tell them everything he'd been holding back. He wanted to tell them about Dumbledore and the prophecy, get it off his chest and out in the open. But if he told them, it would be real. Ron's wide-eyed expression of horror would make it real. Hermione's tears would make it real. And once it was real, he couldn't go on pretending that it wasn't.

"I..." he started, but he didn't know quite how to make them understand. "I will tell you," he said finally, "eventually. But not now. I just... I just can't right now."

"Come on Sloper! You can do better than that! Really give that Bludger what for!"

The week had gone from bad, to worse, to can't-possibly-get-any-worse, to oh-wait-it-just-did. Harry hovered above his team during practice and watched the sun dipping lower and lower over the mountains in the distance, fingers of shadow reaching out eagerly across the landscape, harbingers of the encroaching darkness. Below him, Jack and Andrew were knocking the Bludger back and forth to one another unenthusiastically, while the Chasers ran through their drills.

Suddenly, a glint of gold and a flutter of movement caught Harry's eye. He swerved down a few feet and his hand flashed out reflexively and snatched the Snitch from the air. The little golden ball was cool in his hand from the deepening chill of the evening. He regarded it for a moment as it flapped and struggled in his fingers before releasing it again for the third time that night. Below him, the Chasers were passing the Quaffle back and forth quite well. Harry opened his mouth to tell them so...

"Get a move on, Ginny! The Slytherin Chasers can go faster than that with their feet on the ground!" Ron bellowed at the team from where he was hovering in front of the goal hoops. Harry sighed wearily. He was tired, annoyed, and becoming more and more certain that Ron was trying to take over his job as Quidditch captain. He had convinced Harry to have the team run through a series of drills he had created for their first practice, but the Chasers weren't playing by his rules.

Things would start out all right, with Katie in possession of the Quaffle. She would pass it to Ginny, who would feign left and pass it right to Will Bundy. Will was then supposed to pass it back to Katie, who would go in for the goal, but instead he kept trying to score for himself.

"No no NO!" Ron bawled as Will did the same thing for the third time in a row. "You're supposed to pass it back to Bell! And Ginny! What was that last pass about? Are you *trying* to give the Slytherins the Quaffle??"

"There *aren't* any Slytherins, Ron!" Ginny shouted back. "So lay off!"

Harry scowled. They were making no progress, and their light was fading fast. He wondered if he should call the practice -- if it could be called a practice any more -- off for the night.

"Let's try another!" he decided instead, swooping down between Ron and Ginny who looked about ready to murder one another. "Katie," he said quickly, before Ron could suggest one of his drills, "remember that play where you all swerved to the far left before aiming at the right goal?" Katie nodded wearily. "Show them that one."

She turned her broom and the other chasers followed her. Harry turned to Ron.

"What are you doing?" he demanded.

Ron scowled at him. "What do you mean? I'm coaching the team!"

"Picking on your sister doesn't count as coaching," Harry retorted.

"At least I'm doing something," Ron scoffed.

"What's that meant to mean?"

"Well, you're up there flying around doing Merlin knows what, and you don't say anything! About anything!"

Harry gaped at him. "Because you don't let me get a word in edgewise!" he shouted. "You say everything, whether it needs to be said or not, so why don't you just shut your flipping trap for a minute and concentrate on Keeping, right?" Ron was staring at him, open mouthed. Harry turned his broom quickly and began to speed away. The Chasers looked about ready to run their play.

Harry zoomed up above the level of play and tried to concentrate on watching the Chasers rather than on his frustration with Ron. As the three players started their run, he wondered momentarily where the Beaters had got off too. Too much quiet from them, he was learning, was not a good sign.

Ginny had the Quaffle as she started her approach with the other two Chasers flanking her closely. They swerved dangerously off to the left, practically brushing the stands with their brooms only to shoot right again. Ginny feigned a pass to Will, and he and Katie each broke off, headed for a different goal hoop. Ginny sat up on her broom in preparation to throw the Quaffle. From the corner of his eye, Harry saw something black streaking towards her.

"Ginny!" he yelled, but it was too late. The Bludger caught her full in the stomach and knocked her back off of her broom. The Quaffle flew out of her hands and a terrified Katie screamed something wordless into the wind. Harry plunged into a sickeningly steep dive that made his heart feel as though it were trying to escape through his throat. His Firebolt was fast, but she was too far away. Reaching into his robes, he scrambled for his wand and shouted "*Wingardium Leviosa!*" into the wind. Ginny's downward progress slowed, and he managed to get one arm around her waist as he pulled out of the dive. Together, they drifted slowly down.

When his feet touched solid earth he dropped his broomstick and used both hands to lower Ginny carefully to the ground. She was coughing and trying to breathe, tears streaming down her face. She moaned and whimpered, mouth opening and closing as she lay on the grass, gasping like a fish caught on the riverbank.

"Don't try to talk," he said to her. Katie and Will came running up behind him. "Get a stretcher!" Harry ordered, and Katie ran off towards the changing rooms.

Ginny squinted up at him through her tears. "Harry," she moaned.

"Shhhhh!" he chided her quietly. "Don't talk, I said. We're going to get you up to hospital right away!" Ginny nodded, still whimpering, and Harry clenched his fists.

It was no good! If he couldn't even lead a simple Quidditch practice without someone getting hurt, he hadn't any right to be leading anything...

Katie ran up to them carrying a bundle of canvas and sticks. She shook it, and it popped out into a full sized stretcher. Harry bent down over Ginny and, with Katie's help, gingerly lifted her while Will pushed the stretcher into place. They lowered her again and she let out a little cry of pain. "Get her to Madam Pomfrey," Harry ordered. Katie took up one end of the stretcher, Will the other, and they hurried off towards the castle.

Harry turned back to look for the Beaters. Near the goal hoops, he could see three figures standing on the ground; one of them was gesticulating wildly while the other two watched. Harry groaned inwardly as he mounted his broom and sped towards them.

Ron was in finest Weasley form. Andrew and Jack were standing there, attempting to argue with him, but Ron was barely letting them utter a syllable before drowning them out with his rampage.

"--could have done someone a serious injury! And it's all your fault! You should have been watching those Bludgers more carefully; that is your *job* after all, as Beaters..."

"Ron," Harry said, landing next to them. Ron didn't even look round.

"We can't have proper practices with one of our Chasers holed up in hospital, can we? How do you expect us to beat Slytherin if half our players are injured?"

Andrew scowled blackly and opened his mouth to protest. "Ginny is hardly half-"

"If I didn't know any better I'd say the both of you were blind as bats up there! You boys are treading on thin ice..."

"Ron!"

"You'll be lucky if we don't chuck you off the team straight away!"

"RON!"

"WHAT?" Ron turned to look at Harry at last. He had the Quaffle gripped tightly under one arm. His face was red and sweaty, his eyes blazing with rage and, Harry could see, more than a little fear for his only sister. The Beaters were staring at the pair of them like they'd both gone round the twist.

Harry caught sight of something moving near Ron's head, and in an instant, his hand shot out to catch it. Ron ducked as though he thought Harry was going to hit him. Harry gave him a scathing look as he held up his hand to reveal the Snitch struggling in his fingers.

"Go and get changed, Ron," Harry said firmly. Ron's face flushed even more.

"But Harry, these --"

"Ron!" Harry bellowed. "I said, go and get changed." Ron stared at him, and Harry fancied he could almost feel the heat of his rage.

"Then you can go up and check on Ginny," he added, as an afterthought.

Ron turned abruptly on his heel and stomped off towards the changing rooms. Harry could tell he was going to pay for that later, but he turned away from Ron and back towards the Beaters. Jack was staring at his shoes in a dejected sort of way, and Andrew was looking bitter and defiant.

"What happened?" Harry demanded. They both just looked at him. "I thought I told you to keep the Bludgers *away* from our Chasers; is that too hard to understand?" Andrew scowled and looked like he wanted to say something, but he held his tongue.

Harry shook his head. He didn't have the energy for this. "Just get out of here," he said, disgustedly. Andrew turned on his heel and stomped across the pitch, giving the changing rooms a wide berth, and heading straight up to the castle. Jack hung back.

"Do you want something?" Harry demanded, staring at the younger boy with barely concealed menace. Jack seemed to steel himself as he nodded.

"It was Ron's fault, Harry," he said softly. That wasn't at all what Harry had been expecting him to say. He frowned, wondering if the boy was trying to shift the blame.

"What?"

"It was Ron's fault. We were doing fine until he started yelling at us, and then I was too busy listening to him to realize where the Bludger had got to and..." His voice died and he shrugged expressively.

Harry sighed deeply and nodded. "Thanks Jack," he said sullenly. The other boy nodded, obviously relieved that Harry appeared to believe him, and jogged off towards the castle. Still clutching his broom in one hand and the Snitch in the other, Harry turned and marched dejectedly towards the changing rooms.

Inside, Ron was slamming equipment around and stomping like a troll. Harry wished that there was somewhere -- anywhere -- else he needed to be, but went into the room anyway. Ron was busy putting the Quaffle into its trunk and didn't immediately notice when Harry came in. He had already changed into a pair of ripped jeans and an old rugby shirt that was several inches too short in the sleeves. It showed his wrists whenever he raised his arms. He straightened and stiffened when he saw Harry standing in the doorway. They stared at each other silently for a long minute.

"Did you tell them off then?" Ron asked roughly. "I was thinking we could make them do laps or something as punish--"

"It was an accident, Ron," Harry said firmly. "Things happen." Ron's face began to flush angrily.

"It was *Ginny*, Harry," he retorted fiercely. "I thought you, at least, would understand."

"I understand you feel guilty," Harry replied steadily. He wasn't about to let Ron draw him into another row.

Ron sputtered in disbelief for a moment and shook his head. "Is that what they told you?" he demanded. "That it was *my* fault? Excuse me, but I'm not the one carrying around the Beaters' bats!"

"Then why are you trying to do the Beaters' jobs?" Harry asked. "Or the Chasers' jobs? Or my job, for that matter?"

Ron's expression was oddly mixed between what Harry guessed was a desire to explode and a realization that Harry might be right. He opened and closed his mouth several times not unlike Ginny had minutes before. Finally he snapped his mouth shut and shook his head in apparent disbelief.

"I'm going to check on Ginny," he said darkly, brushing past Harry without a backwards glance.

Harry sighed. "I'll be along in a minute," he said.

"Don't bother," Ron grumbled as he stalked off into the night.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN -- Speechless

Ginny was released from the hospital wing by Monday morning, fully mended and none the worse for wear, though she told Harry that Ron had practically driven her mad with his mollycoddling.

After Harry told her that Ron's interference had caused the Beaters to lose sight of the Bludger, she quickly apologized to Andrew for the bat bogeys and to Jack for the Dungbombs in his shoes.

For their part, Ron and Harry were not particularly fighting, but not particularly friendly either, and Ron began to spend more and more time off on his own. He was frequently gone at lunchtimes, and came in for dinner looking frazzled but pleased with himself. Hermione speculated that he was probably just getting a good handle on all of his homework as he was hardly ever in the common room when they were doing theirs. Harry wasn't so sure.

By mid-week, Harry had given up trying to engage Ron in any conversation at all. They walked to and from classes with Hermione or Gwyn between them, and while they both spoke animatedly to everyone around them, they rarely spoke a word to one another.

"I thought Professor Lindell's lecture yesterday about spell energy was really fascinating, didn't you?" Hermione asked as they settled themselves into their favorite armchairs near the fire, ready to play Sisyphus to their mountains of school work. Ron was once again conspicuously absent from the common room.

"I don't really think I understood most of it," Harry admitted. "What was all that 'power of intent' business that she was waffling on about?"

Hermione gave him a contemptuous glare that seemed to say, *Professors don't waffle*. "There are three components to working a spell: intention, focus of power, and focus of mind. Speaking an incantation focuses your mind on what you want to do. Your wand, and any particular movements you do with it, focuses your power on the spell, but the most important part is the intent. You have to intend to do something first, otherwise nothing happens at all."

"But then," Harry interjected suddenly, "if intention is the most important part, why can't I just cast any old spell I want, so long as I know what I intend to do?"

"Because you need the other two to focus it," Hermione explained. "Only the most advanced witches and wizards can use the raw power of intention to make magic happen. Most need words and wands to focus the power."

"I suppose that makes sense," Harry said grudgingly, digging for his notes to add Hermione's plain English translation to them. When he looked up again, he saw Ron coming from the direction of the boys' dormitory. Hermione saw him and smiled.

"Are you going to sit with us then, Ron?" she asked in surprise as Ron sunk down onto the armchair nearest to her.

"Well, yeah," Ron said slowly. "I mean, I thought I would. If it's alright." He looked up at Harry pointedly. Harry shrugged.

"Don't be a prat!" Hermione said brightly. "Of course it's all right!"

"By the way," Ron said suddenly, "happy birthday, 'Mione."

Hermione's mouth fell open in an expression of pleased shock. "You remembered!" she squealed delightedly. Ron's ears began to go red.

"Course I remembered," he said in a slightly indignant tone. "And I got you something too."

"Are we doing gifts now?" Harry asked. "I'll run and get mine."

"You don't have to..." Hermione began, but she was grinning from ear to ear.

Harry grinned back at her.

"Back in a minute," he said. He jogged up the spiral staircase to his room and rummaged in his trunk for his gift. He had bought it over the summer with Mrs. Weasley's help, and it had ended up packed at the very bottom. Smiling at the thought of Hermione's reaction, he hurried back down to the common room.

Hermione had already opened Ron's gift, and a long flat box lay open in her lap, a crumple of beautiful silver wrapping forgotten on the floor at her feet. She and Ron were leaning quite close together looking at the gift, Ron sitting forward in his chair so that their heads and knees were almost touching.

Harry heard Hermione laugh slightly, and as she tilted her face up to look at Ron, he suddenly felt very guilty for watching them. He bent down as if to do up his laces, but continued to watch Hermione and Ron out of the corner of his eye. He couldn't help it.

Ron was saying something now, and it made Hermione's eyes light up the way they did when a professor told her she'd gotten the right answer to a particularly difficult question, or when someone praised her for being the smartest witch of her age. She was smiling so prettily that it warmed up her entire face. Harry couldn't see Ron's face, but he saw Ron point something out in the box. Slowly, his hand moved up right to the side of Hermione's face, where he was almost touching her hair. Hermione was watching him intently.

"Happy birthday, Hermione!" Ginny called suddenly, coming up behind them. She was carrying a large box of what looked like Mrs. Weasley's famous birthday treats.

Ron quickly straightened up and sat back in his chair, and Hermione's cheeks turned very pink as she accepted the box from Ginny. Harry stood up and quickly made his way over to the group.

"Thanks Ginny!" Hermione said as she opened the box to reveal a tin of Mrs. Weasley's fudge, a large box of Fred and George's After Dinner Entertain-Mints, and three large balls of scarlet and gold wool.

"What on earth?" Hermione asked, holding up the yarn, quizzically.

"I think that's meant to go with my gift," Harry said, pressing his box into her hands. "Mrs. Weasley helped me pick it out." Hermione tore off the pages of *The Daily Prophet* that Harry had used for wrapping -- much to the photographs' horror -- and opened the box to reveal a fat book of knitting patterns and a pair of needles.

"Mrs. Weasley said those patterns would make a nice change from scarves and elf hats," Harry explained, "and the needles change size automatically for whatever pattern you're doing."

"Oh, Harry they're wonderful!" Hermione said happily, flipping eagerly through the pages of the book. "Look at these jumpers. That doesn't look too hard at all!" She looked up and smiled brightly at him. "Thank you so much!" she said.

Ginny moved around from behind Hermione to perch on the arm of Harry's armchair.

"So what did Ron give you then?" she asked.

Hermione blushed again. "Well... See for yourself."

She set Harry's presents aside to reveal a long low wooden box, beautifully stained and polished and expertly made. The lid was hinged, and when she opened it, she revealed a beautiful silver brush and comb set with a matching hand mirror nestled snugly in rich burgundy velvet.

"Oooh!" Ginny said in awe. She reached out to touch the comb, the teeth of which looked to be made of ivory. The back of the brush and mirror were covered in an intricate pattern of leaves and vines, and the handle of the mirror was solid milky green jade.

"Well call me a fairy's uncle," Ginny said. "Well done Ron!"

Hermione gave an uncomfortable little laugh and Ron looked rather affronted.

"What's that meant to mean?" he demanded of his sister.

Ginny gave him an incredulous look. "I never knew you had any taste. Three years in a row you've given me socks," she said plainly.

Ron frowned. "You're hard to shop for," he said defensively.

Ginny picked up the mirror and held it up to examine it. "They're really beautiful," she said, passing Harry the mirror for inspection. It was amazingly light and artfully made. On the reflective side, little tendrils of silver vines and tiny silver blossoms overlapped the oval surface making the mirror itself look almost like a perfectly still pond done all in silver. Harry glanced over at Ron in surprise as he handed the mirror back to Hermione, and Ron blushed furiously.

"I think Hermione really liked your gift," Harry ventured as he and Ron headed up the stairs to their dormitory a while later. Ron blushed again, but looked pleased.

"Yeah? I hope so. I had a bugger of a time deciding what to get her," he replied. "But blast it all if Ginny isn't going to expect better birthday gifts from now on..."

"They looked really expensive," Harry said, wondering where Ron had got the galleons for a gift like that. "Kinda put my knitting book to shame!"

Ron snorted and gave a little shrug. "They're antiques and I... They reminded me of her, I guess."

Harry watched his friend thoughtfully as Ron kicked his shoes off under his bed. They were alone, none of the other sixth year boys having come up for bed yet, and Ron didn't seem to be too upset at speaking with him, so Harry thought he'd go ahead and ask the question that was burning in his brain.

"So..." Harry began slowly, "do you, I dunno, fancy her then?"

Ron looked up at him sharply, and Harry tried his best to keep his face neutral. Ron frowned slightly, but it wasn't an angry expression.

"I don't know," he said finally. He seemed to be watching Harry closely for any sign that he was going to laugh, but Harry had no intention of laughing.

"She drives me absolutely mad sometimes!" Ron continued. "And not in that silly dreamy way people go on about in romances. Bloody well starkers round the twist, she is! But then..." He shrugged expressively. "Other times..." Harry saw his eyes wander over to a framed photo on his nightstand. It was of the three of them in their second year at the Ravenclaw Slytherin Quidditch match. They had their arms round each other and all of them were pink cheeked and laughing. Colin Creevy had taken it and they had bought three copies off of him, one for each.

"I'd do anything for her," Ron continued at last. "I know that." He glanced up at Harry. "But then, you would too, I reckon."

Harry shrugged. "I'd do pretty much anything for either of you," he said simply. Ron nodded.

"I just want her to be happy, I guess," Ron said finally. "When she's happy, I'm happy. That's all." He lay back on his bed to stare at the canopy, and Harry sensed that the conversation was over.

He got up and changed into a pair of cotton pajama pants quietly, thinking hard. Part of him felt rather pleased at the thought of Ron and Hermione together, but another, smaller, darker part worried that if they ever did start dating, he would be the one left out. He shook his head slightly. Ron hadn't even admitted to liking her, so there was no sense in worrying about that now.

Ron was putting about, changing out of his robes, and sucking on his toothbrush as Harry climbed into bed.

"So, are we alright then?" Harry asked finally. Ron snorted.

"Shut up, Harry. We're best mates, you and me."

And that was all he needed to say.

Harry had been dozing peacefully, his mind wandering just onto the edge of a dream in which he and Hermione and Ron were going down to the Quidditch pitch where Colin Creevy was going to do their portraits, when the dormitory door slammed open with a crash. Harry jolted awake and heard the disgruntled grumblings of the other boys around him.

Sitting up, he grabbed the curtain around his bed and pulled it back to see who was making all the racket. All the other boys still had the curtains drawn, except for Neville.

He was standing at the end of his bed, fully dressed, and he seemed to be pointing his wand at his own head. Harry blinked and squinted in the dark, trying to see what he was up to.

"All right there, Nev--"

As Harry spoke, Neville turned to look at him and Harry's voice failed him. Neville's face was bruised and bloodied, but more horrifying than any of the cuts or contusions was the fact that his mouth seemed to be missing -- entirely.

Harry started and grabbed for his glasses, certain that he couldn't be seeing clearly, but when he jammed them on his nose and looked back at Neville's pitiful face, his worst fears were confirmed.

Both of Neville's eyes had been blackened, his nose was crooked and bloody, and there was a nasty lump coming on the side of his head. Worst of all, however, the area between his nose and his chin, where his mouth should have been, was completely and unnaturally smooth, as if his skin had grown to cover his mouth completely.

Harry leaped to his feet. "What happened?" he asked stupidly, and Neville gave him a scathing look.

"Shut up, Harry!" Dean grunted from his own bed.

"No look!" Harry said amid the sounds of bed curtains opening, "Neville's hurt!" Rushing over to the stove in the middle of the room, Harry lit the lamp with his wand, and, turning back to see Neville bathed in its light. Immediately, he wished he hadn't.

"Bloody hell!" Ron exclaimed.

"Is it just me," Dean asked shakily, "or is his mouth missing?" No one bothered to answer.

"Who did this to you, mate?" Ron asked, getting out of bed. "Can you write it?"

Neville nodded and grabbed a spare bit of parchment from his satchel. He fumbled with ink and quill for a moment before shoving the paper at Harry.

It had one word written on it: *Malfoy*.

"Where is he?" Ron demanded on seeing the parchment. He launched off the end of his bed and grabbed his wand. "Where is he? I'll kill the bastard. I'll murder him. I'll--"

"Hadn't we ought to get Neville's mouth back first?" Dean asked. Ron didn't reply as he was busy pulling a jumper on over his boxers.

"Do you know what curse it was, Neville?" Harry asked. Neville shook his head solemnly. His left eye was more severely battered than the right, and it was beginning to swell shut. "Does anybody know what curse could do this?" Harry asked. They all looked at him blankly.

"Let's take him to hospital," Dean suggested, going for his slippers, but Neville shook his head violently. "Why not, Neville?" Dean demanded. "Madam Pomfrey'll fix you up in two flicks of a dragon's tail!"

Neville shook his head again and sat down on the end of his bed, resolutely crossing his arms across his chest. It was clear he was not planning to go to the hospital wing any time soon.

"What are we going to do, then?" Ron asked. "I mean, you can't very well stay that way... People will talk."

Neville gave him a very dirty look.

"We need to figure out what curse did this, and then we can look up the counter spell," Harry said, going for his trunk. He started pulling out books at random and stacking them on the floor.

"That'll take ages!" Ron complained. "We need Hermione..." Suddenly his face brightened. "Why not?" he said. "I bet she'll know." He stood up and headed for the door.

"Ron!" Harry chided. "Did you forget what happened the last time you tried to go into the girls' dormitories?" Ron stopped in his tracks. "You'll wake the whole house if you set that alarm off again."

Ron thought about this for a moment and shrugged. "I bet she'd come out though. Perfect little Prefect that she is, she'd want to know what was going on."

Neville shook his head again, obviously appalled at the thought of waking all of Gryffindor Tower.

"Oy, Seamus! Get up you great lump!" Dean shouted, leaning over Seamus' still sleeping form. The boy didn't move. Dean shook his head.

"Can sleep through anything, this one can." He leaned down directly over Seamus' ear. "OY! SEAMUS!"

Seamus snorted and flailed as he woke suddenly.

"We've got an emergency, here!" Dean said pointing at Neville before the startled Seamus could lay forth with the string of obscenities that were so obviously waiting on his lips.

"Blimey," was all he managed at the sight of Neville's missing mouth.

"We need Hermione," Ron said firmly. "So one of us is going to have to brave the stairs to the girls' dorm." The other four boys stared at him. "I vote Harry should do it."

"Why me?" Harry demanded. "You're the Prefect, here!"

"I was a Prefect last year too," Ron countered, "and it didn't make a bit of difference. But you're McGonagall's favorite, if she's got one. She won't be so hard on you if you get caught."

Harry stared at him in disbelief, but the other three boys seemed to agree that Harry was the logical choice. "You're off your nut," Harry grumbled. "She'll murder us all if I get caught..." But he allowed himself to be led, with Neville, down to the common room.

The room was dark except for the last few dying embers of the common room fire. The five Gryffindor boys marched purposefully across the darkened room to the matching spiral staircase that led up to the girls' dormitories. They all stared at it reverently.

"No man's land," Seamus whispered.

"Maybe," Ron said suddenly, "if your intentions are pure, the stairs will let you up."

Harry stared at him. "Do you really think so?"

"No, but it's worth a shot. We've got to get her down here."

Harry sighed. He took a step forward, and the other boys took a step back. "We who are about to die, salute you," Harry muttered.

He walked to the very edge of the bottom step and looked up the staircase. It looked perfectly normal in every way, but he had watched it turn into a slide and spit Ron right back down to the floor on his bum.

"I swear," Harry whispered aloud. "My intentions are pure. I just need to get Hermione Granger. It's an emergency." When he finished, he felt rather foolish, but Ron was right; it was worth a shot.

Feeling that he couldn't put it off any longer, he gingerly lifted his foot and placed his toes lightly on the bottom step. Nothing happened. He slid his foot all the way onto the stair, and still nothing. Feeling slightly braver, he put his weight onto the step.

The stones remained silent. No klaxon rang out to wake the tower. With a disbelieving look over his shoulder, Harry raced up the stairs two at a time until he reached the door marked "6th Years."

Steeling himself for the wrath of whoever might open the door, he banged on it loudly. For a moment, nothing happened. He raised his fist to knock again, but before he could hit it, the door swung away from him. A very angry looking Parvati appeared in the entryway. Her long black hair was plaited down her back and she was wearing a pair of aquamarine, silk pajamas.

"Harry??" she exclaimed, her anger turning to outright shock. "What are you doing here? You're not supposed to -- how did you get up here?"

"I need to see Hermione!" he replied. "It's an emergency!" Parvati put her hands on her hips.

"Harry?"

Over Parvati's shoulder, Harry could see Hermione's head poking through the hangings around her bed. She rubbed her eyes, as if she weren't quite sure she was truly seeing him. "What is it?" she said, her voice becoming tinged with fear. "What's wrong?"

"It's--" Harry glanced at Parvati. "It's nothing... We just need your help. *Right now.*"

Parvati scowled. "As if I care anyway!" she snapped, turning to head back to her bed. Somewhere in the darkness, Lavender snored.

Hermione jumped out of bed, pulled on a red bathrobe over her nightgown, and slid her feet into a pair of slippers at the foot of the bed.

"Bring your wand!" Harry said. Hermione gave him a worried look, but grabbed her wand and followed him out onto the landing. She was struggling to tie her hair -- which had seemed to have taken on a life of its own -- back with a hair band.

"Harry!" she whispered, closing the door behind her. "What's going on? How on earth did you get up here? There are supposed to be alarms and it clearly says in *Hogwarts: A History* that--"

"It's Neville!" Harry said, grabbing her wrist and pulling her down the stairs. He wasn't keen to spend any more time in the stairwell than necessary, lest the stones change their mind about his good intentions.

"Well done, Harry!" Dean cheered, as Harry and Hermione stumbled out of the dark stairway and into the common room.

"Is someone please going to tell me what on earth--" Hermione gasped and put her hands over her mouth as the boys moved aside so that she could see Neville. She rushed over to him, staring in wide eyed disbelief. "How... Who?"

"Malfoy," Harry answered bitterly.

Hermione whirled on them. "He needs to go to the hospital wing right now!" she said. "But you lot didn't need to wake me up to tell you that, I hope. SoWhat's going on?"

"Neville won't go." Ron retorted. Hermione gave him an odd look, and it took Ron a moment to realize that he was still only wearing a jumper and boxer shorts. He began to blush and to try to tug down the hem of the jumper.

Hermione turned back and looked at Neville pleadingly, but he shook his head, his eyes dark, mouthless expression set

"We were hoping you'd know what curse it is, so we can put him right," Dean said.

"It's the *Obmutesco* Curse," Hermione said at once, "but I'll have to look up the counter spell." She turned to Harry. "Bring me that book I gave you for your birthday."

"I *told* you it would be in there!" Harry shot at Ron, who shrugged, still blushing madly and now trying to look nonchalant while hiding behind an armchair. Harry dashed up to their room and grabbed the book. Hermione found the counter curse in a matter of moments, and began pushing up the sleeves of her bathrobe to cast it.

"*Ocsetumbo!*" she said, pointing her wand at Neville's face. A bolt of red light lit up the darkened room and Neville flinched as it ripped a wide gash in the smooth skin where his mouth should have been. The gash healed before their very eyes becoming lips and revealing his teeth and tongue.

Neville took a deep breath. "Thanks, Hermione," he said hoarsely as he got up and headed for the stairs.

"Wait just a minute!" she cried, grabbing Neville's arm. Since hitting his growth spurt, Neville, like most of the sixth year boys, now towered over Hermione, but he nevertheless seemed cowed by her obvious ire.

"I didn't get woken from a sound sleep and get dragged down here for you to just say 'Thanks' without so much as a what when, where, why or how! So spit it out, Neville! What happened?"

Neville glanced around at the other Gryffindor boys and seemed to realize that even if he escaped Hermione, he'd have to tell them the story anyway.

"I was in the library," he said moodily, "researching a project for Professor Sprout, and Malfoy and his gang showed up." Neville glanced up, his one good eye looking directly at Harry. "He started making fun of me again, and I... I just lost it." He shrugged. "So I hexed him."

"You did?" Seamus cried.

"In the library?" Hermione gasped.

Neville nodded. "Madame Pince caught me and gave me detention and threw me out," he continued dejectedly. "Malfoy followed me and cursed me from behind. And once I couldn't cry out

any more, he, Crabbe and Goyle had a go at my head." He glared at Hermione rather painfully. "And when I woke up, I came back here. Satisfied?"

"But why don't you want to go to the hospital wing?" Hermione pleaded.

Neville held his head up a little higher. "I knew she'd want to keep me for a day or more, and I'm not going to miss any class. I'm not going to give him the satisfaction." He stared at her resolutely, and Harry again caught a glimpse of the hard, determined man inside the boy.

Hermione took Neville's hand gently and led him back over to one of the armchairs. "Sit," she commanded in a much gentler tone. "Now, let's see what we can do about those bruises. Who's got essence of murtlap in his potions kit?"

Harry, Dean, and Seamus, and Ron ran back to their room for ingredients and supplies. Ron donated a white button down that was two sizes too small, to be used for bandages, and Hermione made quick work of patching Neville up.

"The bruises on your eyes should be gone in a day or two," she said at last, looking over her handiwork. "But you really should go and see Madam Pomfrey about the bump on your head. Just tell her you ran into a door or something," she said at Neville's black look.

"Thanks, Hermione," he said again. He looked round at all of them. "Thanks."

"But I still want to know how you managed to get up the girls' stairs!" Hermione said, rounding on Harry with her hands on her hips. Harry shrugged expressively.

"I'm not even sure," he said. "Ron suggested that maybe if I told the stairs that my intentions were pure..." Saying it out loud, he realized that it sounded rather stupid. Ron was blushing again.

"Pure intentions?" Hermione repeated. "That's ridiculous."

"Hey, don't knock it -- it worked, didn't it?" Ron said.

Hermione shook her head. "But why risk it? Why not just send Hedwig to wake me up?" she asked pointedly, looking back to Harry. "Or fly round to our window? You've got at least two brooms between you..."

The boys all stared at her dumbly. Hermione sighed. "Because that would have been easy, I suppose," she answered herself dolefully.

"So," Ron said abruptly, "who's up for a rousing game of 'Murder That Slytherin' tomorrow?" Hermione gave him a worried look.

"I'll second that," Dean said and Seamus nodded.

"It's time to show that prick that when he picks on one of us, he's got to deal with all of us!" Seamus said menacingly.

"No," Neville said simply, but firmly. "It's my fight. I'll get him back myself."

"Besides," Harry said, "we won't have time." The others looked at him questioningly. "Pass the word: DA meeting tomorrow night."

Harry fixed the date and time on his coin as soon as he got up the next morning, knowing that across the castle, its siblings were growing warm to signal the other members of the DA that the meeting time had been set.

The rest of the day passed at a snail's pace. Harry almost fell asleep in Professor Lindell's class as she droned on and on in lecture about the fundamental differences between regular magic and Dark Magic, and Ron had to poke him in the ribs several times to keep him from nodding off. He couldn't wait to get down to some real Defense later that night.

Harry was also feeling anxious because he wanted to speak to Gwyn, and his opportunity arrived later that afternoon in Care of Magical Creatures. Hagrid had sent them to the edge of the Forbidden Forest to hunt for sparrows, wrens and other small birds to feed the Gargoyles they had captured. The class spread out along the edge of the forest, enjoying the sunshine, and occasionally sending a half-hearted spell into a tree after an elusive bird. Harry quickly made his way over to Gwyn, and she grinned as she saw him coming up to her.

"Catch anything yet?" she asked. Harry shook his head and she gave him a wry grin. "Well, I can see you're trying really hard," she chided, indicating the wand sticking out of his back pocket.

"Oh is *that* how we were supposed to do it?" he asked, feigning surprise. "I thought we were meant to catch them with our hands."

Gwyn laughed. "I'll give you a buck if you do," she replied.

Slowly they began to wander into the trees towards a clump of bushes a little ways in. Harry watched Gwyn surreptitiously as she tucked a strand of hair out of her face, her eyes tilted upwards, scanning the canopy of trees for the flutter of wings. She had a little basket hung over her arm that Hagrid had given them for collecting the birds in, and she swung it slightly as they walked.

"Have you done Snape's essay on slow acting poisons yet?" Gwyn asked absently, drawing Harry back from his mental wanderings.

"No," he replied unashamedly. "Dunno when I'd have time."

"Well," Gwyn said, rustling a bush in the hopes of rousing out a bird or two, "I was going to go to the library tonight to do some research." She paused and looked sideways at Harry. "I'd love some help if you're not busy."

Harry grinned broadly and nodded as a warm sensation filled him at the thought of spending an evening uninterrupted with Gwyn. He was about to ask what time, when he remembered why he'd wanted to talk to her in the first place.

"Oh," he said suddenly crestfallen. "I can't." Gwyn turned away quickly, but Harry thought she looked disappointed. "I mean," Harry faltered, "I'd like to, but we're having our first defense club meeting tonight, and I was hoping you might want to come."

Gwyn turned back to him, a look of surprise on her face. "Defense club?" she repeated. "Harry, I've never had anything more than the most rudimentary lessons in Defense Against the Dark Arts."

"All the more reason for you to come!" Harry insisted but Gwyn still looked uncertain.

"Well, what exactly does one do in defense club?" she asked, not meeting his gaze.

"We learn practical defense, like shield charms, and curses and hexes and stuff like that."

"Mmmmm..." Gwyn took a few steps away from him deeper into the woods. "You mean you learn how to fight."

Harry shrugged. "We learn how to defend ourselves, yeah." Gwyn turned to look at him.

"Defend yourselves against whom?" she asked, pointedly. "Against Malfoy and his like?" Harry frowned at her.

"Yeah," he said pointedly, "them too." Gwyn seemed to grasp his meaning. She pursed her lips into a tight little rosebud of consternation. Finally she turned away from him again, a blush of color rising in her cheeks.

"Thanks, but I think I'll pass, Harry. I've got that Potions essay and... and all." She glanced back at him and Harry frowned. He wanted to rail at her for being too nearsighted to see the danger all around her. Why couldn't he make her see that this game she thought he was playing was all too real?

Gwyn seemed to sense his rising anger and took a step back towards him. Her expression was apologetic and pleading. "I wouldn't be any good at it anyway... I'm sure I'd just hold you all back..." She paused, her eyes searching his. "We were doing so good there for a while. Can't we just agree to disagree, Harry?" she asked finally.

Harry wanted to shout at her that no, they couldn't, because he was right and if she didn't work that out for herself she'd probably end up dead, but instead, he nodded. Gwyn looked relieved, and Harry spent the rest of the lesson trying not to let on how disgruntled he was feeling.

When Harry, Ron, and Hermione reached the Room of Requirement a few minutes before the meeting was set to start, Harry was glad to see the room looking exactly the way they had left it the year before. He had been a little afraid that they would find a piano and a breezy desert courtyard, but the book-lined shelves, dark detectors, and piles of cushions reassured him.

One by one, the members of Dumbledore's Army appeared in the doorway, many of them with anxious-looking new members in tow. Neville was one of the first to appear, and while most of his cuts and bruises were well on the way to being healed, thanks to Hermione's ministrations, he was still quite a sight with a swollen nose and two black eyes.

When everyone had arrived, Harry cleared his throat before trying to get their attention, only he found he didn't have to do anything more. At the sound, every head turned towards him and every voice fell silent.

"Thanks for coming on such short notice," Harry said. "We've got a little business to attend to before we start, but I want to make it quick so we can get going with practical stuff."

"Hear, hear!" Ernie cheered. Next to him, Hannah Abbott looked mortified.

"First," Harry started, "we need someone to take care of a lot of the details of running the club, like our roster, and coordinating schedules and everything. I'm rubbish at that sort of thing, so I'd like to nominate Hermione."

Hermione glanced up at him in surprise, and then blushed as she realized everyone was looking at her.

"Everyone in favor," Harry said. Almost every hand went into the air. "Opposed?" he asked. Zacharias Smith raised his hand, but Harry ignored him. He was likely only doing it to be contrary anyway.

"Great, so the first thing we need is a list of everyone in the club," Harry said, pulling out a piece of parchment and handing it to Hermione to pass around. She held it out to Parvati. Parvati gave Hermione a slightly mistrustful look.

"Don't worry," Harry said with a grin. "It isn't jinxed. I just need a list of everyone to give to Professor Lindell." Parvati took the parchment and reluctantly signed her name.

"Also," Harry continued as the paper made its way around the room, "we need to coordinate schedules, so everybody needs to give Hermione a copy of their timetable sometime this week so we can work out when to meet. OK? Good. Any questions?"

The group stared back at him silently, attentively, waiting for his next instructions. For the briefest moment, Harry pictured them all waiting for him to give them the order to go into battle. He pushed the image quickly away.

"OK," he said quickly, "everybody who was here last year partner up with someone new and we'll start going over the basics."

The students quickly scrambled to follow his instructions, and only a few old members were left without a new member to partner. Dennis Creevy had brought along Natalie MacDonald, who would shy away from Harry whenever he passed them; Geoffry Hooper had showed up with Jack and Andrew, though Harry couldn't quite figure out who had told them about the meeting; Padma had brought Mandy Brocklehurst, a pretty dark haired Ravenclaw, and her boyfriend Mo MacDougal; Justin had brought his friend Wayne Hopkins, who Harry recognized from their potions class, along; but perhaps most surprising were the two people Luna brought -- a fifth year named Terrance Higgs, and a fourth year named Phoebe Llewellyn -- both of whom were from Slytherin.

"Harry!" Ron hissed coming over to stand near him as the new students practiced the disarming charm with members from the previous year. "Did you see?" he demanded, motioning with his head towards the corner where Luna and Neville had partnered with Terrance and Phoebe.

"Yeah," Harry said, "I saw."

"Well, you're not going to let them stay, are you? They'll rat us out!"!"

"Rat us out to whom?" Hermione demanded. "We're a legal club this year, remember?"

"That doesn't mean that everyone's going to be thrilled about it," Ron retorted. "In fact, I can think of several people whose *parents* might be rather less than thrilled to know about a club called 'Dumbledore's Army'." He turned back to Harry. "You can't let them stay, mate! They could be spies!"

Harry considered this as he stared at the unlikely pair in the corner. Terrance was tall and skinny with a long neck and rather protuberant adam's apple. His brown curly hair hung long in his eyes and around his face and gave him a sort of dopey look; but his eyes were sharp and keen, and he was picking up on the disarming charm fairly quickly. Next to him, Phoebe was small and waifish with short black braids in her hair and a complexion the color of coffee with cream. She was trying very determinedly to hex Neville, who was patiently explaining to her what she was doing wrong.

"I don't think they're spies," Harry said finally. "They can stay."

Ron gave him a shocked look. "You can't be serious! Harry, they're *Slytherins*!"

"Yeah well," Harry shrugged, "nobody's perfect." Ron scowled, but Hermione gave Harry an approving smile.

Harry realized fairly quickly that the older members would soon be bored if they had to start from scratch with all the new people, so after running them through a few minutes each on some of the basic charms they'd learned the previous year, Harry blew his whistle and called them all back together.

"Good work!" he said heartily, beaming around at the assembled faces, who were all looking rather proud of themselves. "But we can't go on doing revisions for everyone as long as we'd like; we have more important things to move on too. So, I was thinking that the new members could have extra practice sessions for the first few weeks to get caught up." There were murmurs and nods of assent through the group. "Maybe some of the older members could volunteer to lead them?" Everyone began looking around at each other. Harry looked pointedly at Ron, but Ron looked away quickly. Then Luna raised her hand.

"I'll volunteer," she said with a wide smile. Harry nodded, thinking that beggars couldn't be choosers, and hoped that Luna wouldn't be the only one to step up. Harry glanced back at Ron, who, this time, emphatically shook his head.

"I'll help," Neville said quietly. Harry looked at him in surprise, but then smiled warmly.

"Good!" he said. "Great! You two hang about after and we'll get your schedules set." Sensing that the meeting was over, the group began to disperse, and Harry noticed with some amusement that they did so in small groups just as they had the year before when Umbridge was forever on their tails.

After giving their schedules to Hermione, Neville and Luna left together. Neville's battered face was shining, and Harry heard them already discussing lesson plans. He grinned.

Hermione was busily making notes on the roster they had passed around. Next to Harry's name she had written "President," next to her own, "Secretary," and next to Neville and Luna's, "Assistants."

"Harry," she said, frowning over the parchment, "I just noticed that Cho didn't sign up."

Harry was surprised and tried to remember if he'd seen her at the meeting at all. "Did she come?" he asked.

Hermione shook her head blankly. Ron was looking over her shoulder reading the parchment.

"What's my title going to be then?" he asked.

"You don't get a title unless you do something," Hermione said pointedly.

"I do things!" Ron rejoined. "What do you call that tidying up I just did then?"

"So you want to be club janitor?" Hermione asked sweetly, her quill poised over the parchment.

"I tried to get you to volunteer to train the newbies with Neville and Luna," Harry reminded him.

Ron scoffed. "I haven't got time! I'm swamped with Quidditch practice and homework and... other stuff. I'm already behind as it is."

Hermione stared at him. "How can you be behind? You've got two free periods more than either of us has, and you're never at lunch or studying in the common room. What are you doing if not studying?"

Ron gave her an uncomfortable look. "I'm just saying I'm busy, OK? We all are."

"Yeah well," Harry said, leading the way out of the room and back towards Gryffindor Tower, "there are some things that are just more important."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN -- Escalation

The shouting echoed three corridors away, and even before he could distinguish one word from another in the deluge of sound, Harry knew it was about him.

"I do hope you didn't call me here merely to discuss my instruction of Potter, because I have much better things--"

"I called you here to apologize to Mr. Potter!"

"You dare presume--"

"Presume! You're a fine one to talk! Taking an innocent boy in your tutelage and--"

"Innocent? I think not."

"Yes, innocent. He's only a boy!"

"Underestimating the basic maliciousness of your students is your first mistake."

Harry slunk unhappily up the hallway towards the angry voices. As much as he enjoyed hearing Snape taken down a peg, and Lindell seemed to be doing a fairly decent job of it, he wasn't particularly happy to be the subject of the argument.

"What you did was inexcusable. You didn't give him any way of protecting himself."

"You are hardly in a position to question my teaching methods."

"Teaching methods? What did you teach him? Hatred? Loathing? Mistrust? It was torture!"

Harry listened to the pregnant silence that followed as he hung back in the shadows opposite Professor Lindell's open office doorway.

"Has it not occurred to you that the *torture* you speak of might have been for the boy's own good?" Snape's voice drawled icily.

"You cannot convince me that it was the only way, or even the best way."

"Perhaps not. But it was the most expedient."

"You're talking about a young man's life, not some shortcut--"

"Indeed, it was hardly a shortcut. Even given the strongest impetus I could muster, Potter still showed no aptitude whatsoever for the art of Occlumency."

"Harry has proved quite a quick study in our lessons together," Lindell replied, a sharp edge of pride in her voice.

Harry winced. Hardly a wise move on Lindell's part, he thought. The silence that followed was so cold that Harry shivered.

"You are implying?" Snape asked softly. Lindell hardly waited for the last syllable to die on his lips.

"That perhaps you did not want Harry to block his mind. Perhaps you had other plans for him."

Harry felt a trickle of sweat roll down his neck behind his right ear. He'd said as much as the same thing to Remus, blaming Snape for Sirius' death, yet somehow, hearing Lindell say the words made Harry feel very guilty.

"I refuse to listen to any more of your baseless accusations," Snape said with finality.

"I know what you are, Severus Snape."

"You know nothing. And you understand even less."

"I saw you that day... at the funeral. I saw you." Lindell's voice was beginning to rise in pitch. She was wavering, losing her balance, and beginning to sound slightly hysterical. "You dared to show solidarity with *him*, to stand at her graveside, to mourn with the rest of us. I saw you."

Harry wasn't quite sure he was following the conversation entirely, but he continued to listen intently. Snape never said a word.

"I watched you kneel by her grave and toss a clod of earth down to cover her. I saw you try to wipe your hands of it, Severus... but some marks never come clean."

She spoke the words with such hatred that Harry could scarcely believe it was the same woman he saw every week in lessons, the woman who rarely smiled, whom he had never heard laugh, yet who never seemed sad or overly distraught either. Annoyance and shock were about the strongest feelings he'd ever seen her exhibit. It seemed as though she had been saving up all of her emotion for that one pronouncement and it chilled Harry to the very bone.

"I do not answer to you," Snape whispered.

"You do!" she countered angrily. "If anyone has the right to demand an explanation from you, I do. So explain yourself! Give me a reason for your continued existence -- I dare you to try!"

"You were still a child. You could never have understood--"

"She was still a child, too!"

"She was my friend!"

Lindell laughed, and the sound wasn't a pleasant one. "I didn't think you knew the meaning of the word."

"This conversation is over," Snape said in his most intimidating voice, the one that made students the school over quake in their very boots. "If you delight in rehashing old times, that is your business, but I refuse to do so with an audience."

Lindell didn't reply. When Snape spoke again, Harry could hear the sneer in his voice.

"Surely," he drawled, "you are a competent enough Legilimens to realize that Potter is even now standing outside your door, listening." He paused. "Perhaps it is no wonder that he finds Occlumency so simple with you for a teacher..."

Abruptly, Snape appeared in the doorway, and Harry shrunk back, trying to look like he had not been listening to their every word. Snape didn't even bother to glance at him; he merely swept off down the corridor in a black cloud of condescension.

Slowly, carefully, Harry slunk towards Lindell's office once again and peered cautiously around the doorframe. She was standing with her back to the door, staring at the assembled photographs on top of her cabinet.

"Come in, Mr. Potter, and close the door," she said in a controlled voice.

Feeling decidedly guilty for having been caught eavesdropping, Harry quietly pulled the door shut. The battered table from his previous visit was gone and the large old desk once again dominated the room. Harry sunk silently into the worn leather chair and waited for Professor Lindell to speak.

She seemed absorbed in the photographs, however, and Harry didn't want to disturb her. He watched as she ran a fingertip along the silver frame of the foremost picture; a young girl, maybe eleven or twelve years old looked up at her with a wise smile. The girl wore two long pigtails and thick glasses and was clinging happily to the arm of an older girl, who was tall and lovely, with light colored hair and a charming smile. Harry stared at them, wondering who they were, when Professor Lindell turned towards him. In that instant, seeing her standing next to the photo, Harry realized that the girl with the pigtails had once been her.

Professor Lindell's face was carefully impassive as she walked around behind her desk and sunk down into the chair. For a moment, it seemed as though she was avoiding his gaze, then abruptly, her cool grey eyes snapped up and looked directly into his.

"I would appreciate, Mr. Potter, if you would keep my conversation with Professor Snape to yourself," she said levelly. She made it seem as though he'd just walked in on them sharing a spot of tea rather than a blazing row, but he nodded all the same.

"I was hoping to convince your Potions Master to offer you an apology for his inexcusable behavior..." her eyes flashed momentarily, but she remained composed. "But he did not agree with my assessment of the situation."

"It's all right, Professor," Harry said quickly. "I've had time to think it over, and I reckon maybe he actually *was* trying to help me..." He couldn't believe the words were coming out of his own mouth. But there they were, hanging in the air of Lindell's office plain as day. Professor Lindell stared at him.

"Be that as it may, Mr. Potter," she said sternly, "it isn't his place to decide such things. If -- and I am not convinced that it is -- but if it somehow were the most practical way to teach you, he should have discussed it with Headmaster Dumbledore and your guardians first."

Harry snorted back an ironic laugh. "My guardians couldn't care less what anyone does to me here," he said. Professor Lindell regarded him with interest for a moment, before apparently deciding not to comment.

"I have your Centre for you," she said instead, reaching into a desk drawer and retrieving his purple crystal. She handed it to him, and he watched the little clouds inside eddy and boil within. He suddenly realized that he'd left the other in the dormitories under Neville's bed, and hoped she wouldn't ask him for it.

"Clear your mind," she said simply, "and we will begin."

Harry closed his eyes and fought to clear his mind, but before he felt even remotely ready, he heard Professor Lindell whisper "*Legilimens!*"

This time was different. It was as though the memories were flowing at random. He was on the floor in Professor Snape's office, rubbing his knees where he'd hit the ground; he was playing Quidditch at the Burrow with all the Weasley boys; it was Christmas at Grimmauld Place, and Sirius was singing off-key as he hung Father Christmas hats on the house elf heads mounted on the wall; Harry was having his wand weighed with Fleur, Viktor, and Cedric before the first Tri-Wizard task...

Harry tried to concentrate on stemming the flow of memories. At first, he couldn't distract himself from the flashing images long enough to do much of anything, but slowly, he found he could block them out, concentrate, and he began pushing with his mind.

The surge of memories began to slow. He was on the Knight Bus with Tonks, Remus and the others on the way to Hogwarts. The seats swayed and rocked with the movement of the bus, and he was trying not to look out the window at the scenery whipping past. Tonks, dressed as an old woman, was saying something to him about tipping the driver...

Then he was standing in the Room of Requirement watching Cho begin to cry. He wanted to reach out to her, to comfort her. He wanted her to stop crying. And then she was close to him. Much too close. She looked up, and he followed her gaze to see that they were standing under the mistletoe... Harry didn't want Professor Lindell to see this, and so he pushed -- hard.

Suddenly, he wasn't in the Room of Requirement anymore. He was standing in a graveyard. It was wet and cold, and there was a big, ugly, black hole in the ground in front of him. Across the hole, there were people gathered, all dressed in black, and he was staring at two men; one was tall and regal looking with short cropped blonde hair, the other was shorter and dark, with sallow skin, lank black hair, and a hooked nose. There was a voice, and he turned to see a woman and a man approaching him. The woman was pregnant and crying--

The memory ended abruptly. Harry blinked hard for several seconds. That last one wasn't his memory.

"How did you..." Professor Lindell demanded. She was staring at him very sternly over the tops of her oval glasses.

"I'm sorry..." Harry said, not entirely sure what he was apologizing for. It just seemed the right thing to say. Professor Lindell just stared at him, and he had the impression that she was trying to center herself.

"Mr. Potter," she said at last, "why didn't you tell me that Professor Snape had also been teaching you Legilimency?"

Harry stared at her. "Because he didn't," he replied. She raised an incredulous eyebrow at him. "I swear," Harry insisted. "I don't know any Legilimency."

"Then what, precisely, would you call what just happened?" she asked. Harry shook his head while Professor Lindell got up and began to pace.

"What is the last thing you saw?" she asked. Harry tried to picture the scene again.

"It was a funeral," he said slowly, "and Professor Snape was there, and..." he faltered slightly. "Was that my Mum?"

Professor Lindell whirled around to face him again. "It was," she said flatly. "Tell me, has this ever happened before? Have you ever broken into someone's mind before?"

Harry nodded slowly. "It happened once with Professor Snape," he replied. "But I didn't know I was doing Legilimency, I swear!"

Professor Lindell waved a hand at him dismissively and continued to pace. "I've never seen anyone with such a natural inclination towards it..." she said softly, more to herself than to him. "It's a dangerous tool, Mr. Potter. You'll have to be trained."

"I'm sorry," Harry said again, sensing that she was still upset with him.

Lindell stopped pacing and went back to her chair. "It's my own fault," she said dismissively. "I shouldn't have tried to break into your mind when my own was so... troubled." She reached up and took off her glasses, sat them on the desk, and rubbed her temples in a tired gesture. When she looked at him again, Harry was struck by the change the glasses made in her appearance; without them, her eyes were much more visible.

"I think you should go, Mr. Potter. We'll make up this lesson another time." Harry nodded quickly and turned to go.

"Professor," he ventured, "may I ask you a personal question?"

She looked up at him for a moment, and then inclined her head slightly in assent.

"Whose funeral was it?"

"My sister's," Professor Lindell said simply. Harry nodded and took another step towards the door.

"Mr. Potter," she said. He turned back. "Who was the man with the abysmal singing voice?"

Harry looked her straight in the eye. "My godfather," he replied. "Sirius Black."

He waited for the look of horror, the accusations, the questions, but they never came. Professor Lindell just looked at him for a moment, and then nodded.

Harry knew he had agreed not to tell anyone about Professor Lindell's "conversation" with Snape, but practically bursting with the new information, he convinced himself that telling Ron and Hermione didn't really count. He sat them down in a quiet corner of the common room after dinner and related the entire drama.

"The funeral you saw has to be the same one she was talking with Snape about," Hermione surmised after Harry finished telling them what had happened. "It was obviously on her mind, which would explain why you saw that particular memory."

"But why would Snape be at her sister's funeral?" Ron asked.

"He said they were friends," Harry said with a shrug. "But Lindell didn't seem to agree with him. What I really want to know, though, is why my Mum was there."

"Maybe she was friends with Professor Lindell's sister too," Hermione suggested.

"I can't imagine Harry's mum being friends with anyone Snape was friends with," Ron said with a shake of his head.

"Neither can I," Harry agreed. "But she was there, and she was crying."

"Was she there alone?" Hermione asked.

"I think so," Harry said, trying to remember.

"Mmmm..." Hermione frowned.

"What?"

"It's just, if she was pregnant with you, then that was at the height of Voldemort's powers. Do you really think your dad would have let her go out by herself, in her condition?"

Harry thought about this for a moment. "Wait a minute, there was someone..." He closed his eyes trying to remember the man who had been standing behind Lily in the memory. He had been very thin, with tousled tawny hair, and big, sad eyes...

"It was Re-- Lupin!" Harry exclaimed. "He was there with her."

"I definitely can't see him and Snape having the same friends," Ron decided. "But hey," he said suddenly, "Harry, he didn't act like he knew Professor Lindell at all -- remember? He was asking you what she was like."

Harry nodded. It didn't seem to make any sense.

"Who was the man Snape was supposedly showing solidarity with?" Hermione asked.

Harry shrugged. "He was very tall and he had blonde hair, but I only saw him for a moment."

"Sounds like a Malfoy," Ron said with disgust. "Could it have been Lucius?"

Harry frowned and shook his head. "Maybe, but I don't think so." He gave them a quirky smile. "They were all so young, it was hard to tell. And Lupin had a mustache." Hermione smirked and Ron frowned at that.

"Maybe you should ask Professor Lupin about it," Hermione suggested.

"His mustache?" Ron demanded.

"I don't know..." Harry said slowly, finally pulling out the homework they were supposed to be working on. "I don't want to annoy him."

"He said you should," Ron pointed out.

"Yeah, but he didn't really mean it," Harry replied darkly. "He meant, 'be sure and talk to me before you go off half-cocked trying to save my life.'" He regretted saying it the moment the words left his lips. Hermione was giving him one of her patented horrified sympathy stares, and Ron was staring resolutely down at his parchment, which seemed to have suddenly become fascinating.

"Harry..." Hermione began softly, but Ron cut her off.

"Hey, they put up the notice for the first Hogsmeade trip, did you see? It's Halloween!" Hermione gave him a look, but Harry latched onto the topic with gusto.

"Yeah? That'll be cool," he said encouragingly to Ron.

"So who are you going to ask, then?" Ron asked, an evil smirk reminiscent of Fred and/or George creeping across his face.

"What makes you think I'm asking anyone?" Harry asked in his most casual voice. "Can't I just go with you and Hermione, or were you planning on asking someone?" Ron turned rather red and sputtered a little.

"Aren't you going to ask Gwyn?" Hermione asked. It was Harry's turn to blush.

"Er... Hadn't really thought about it," he lied. Actually, he had thought about it. Quite a bit but he wasn't about to tell Hermione, Ron or anyone else for that matter, that when he couldn't sleep he sometimes thought about Gwyn, and taking her to Hogsmeade, and holding hands with her in Madam Puddifoots, and--

"You two haven't had another row, have you?" Hermione asked in an exasperated voice. "Honestly Harry, can't you leave well enough alone?"

Harry frowned. "What are you on about? I never said we had a row! And why would you automatically assume it was my fault if we had?"

Hermione gave him a patient stare.

"I asked her to come to the DA meeting," Harry said, trying to make his voice sound less guilty, "and she said no. That's all."

Hermione heaved a great sigh.

"What?" Harry demanded.

"Can't you even work out that that was about the *worst* thing you could have asked her?" she demanded. "Harry, you two are already at odds over that kind of thing and then you go and invite her to a Defense club meeting? And you really thought that was a good idea?"

Harry stared at her blankly. "I just wanted her to come to the meeting," he said defensively.

Hermione shook her head wearily. "Well, what's done is done," she said with an air of superiority that Harry particularly didn't like. "But if you ask her to go to Hogsmeade with you quickly, she might not have time to realize what a great lumbering idiot you are."

Ron laughed right out loud at this, but Hermione gave him a scathing look.

"I don't know what you're laughing at; when it comes to understanding girls, most of the time you're worse than Harry is!" She snapped her book shut and headed towards the girls' dormitories after giving them both a look of resigned pity.

By Monday morning, Harry had worked himself up into such an anxious lather that he seriously considered staying in bed and avoiding the rest of the school entirely. His sense of duty, however,

won out in the end and he followed the others out into the pouring rain for Herbology, back to the castle for Charms, and then on to lunch. He hadn't yet worked up the courage to speak to Gwyn alone, so he stood resolutely between Ron and Hermione, managing only to say "Good morning," and, "Could you pass the Venomous Tentacula cuttings, please," directly to her all morning. Charms was uncharacteristically dull, as Professor Flitwick regaled them with a long lecture about independently mobile illusions, and so he didn't have a chance to speak to her then, either.

Harry poked at his shepard's pie through lunch and wished that he'd thought to snag a bit of Puking Pastille from his supply so that he could skive off Potions. For a moment, he entertained the idea of running back up to Gryffindor Tower to fetch one, but then decided that it would only make Hermione would frown. Loudly. She was already complaining on an almost daily basis of how many Skiving Snackboxes she'd confiscated. And anyway, the idea of spending a double period with Snape already had his stomach in such knots that the Pastille would probably be redundant.

"Gotta fly," Ron said as he scraped the last of his pie into his mouth. As he stood, he clapped Harry soundly on the back. "Good luck, mate," he said with a supportive grin. "If Snape murders you, I'll give your broom a good home."

"Ta Ron," Harry grumbled. "You're a real pal." Ron laughed and headed for the door.

"Come on, Harry," Hermione said as she began gathering her books. "There's no sense postponing the inevitable." Harry nodded and bent down to retrieve his satchel from under the table.

"Gawd, who died?"

Harry started and banged his head on the table in his hurry to straighten up. Gwyn was looking sympathetically down at him.

"You two look like you just found out you've got cancer of the puppy," she said, wagging an eyebrow at him.

"See you in Potions!" Hermione said quickly, and she shot him a mischievous grin as she dashed for the door.

Gwyn waited for Harry to finish getting his things together, and then they slowly followed her.

"So what's up?" Gwyn asked.

Harry sighed. "You're looking at a dead man. I... er, overheard Snape and Professor Lindell having a private argument," he said despondently.

Gwyn grimaced. "Yikes. Did he catch you?"

Harry nodded.

"You're right," Gwyn said. "You're screwed. Anything I can do to help? You want me to stand in front of you for the whole class? I bet he wouldn't hit a girl." She paused thoughtfully. "And if he did, I bet I could take him."

Harry had to laugh at the thought of Gwyn and Snape in a fist fight. "Actually," he said suddenly, "there is something you could do."

"Name it," she said.

Harry took a deep breath. "Say you'll go to Hogsmeade with me on Halloween."

"Harry, I'll go to Hogsmeade with you on Halloween." She grinned. "What's Hogsmeade?"

"It's the Wizard village near here. They let us go muck about in town a couple of times a year," Harry replied.

"Oh, right!" Gwyn's smile broadened. "Sure! That sounds like fun." Harry began to grin as well.

His happiness, however, was short lived.

On entering the Potions dungeon, Harry saw that Hermione was sitting near the back with Pansy Parkinson and looked decidedly miserable. Harry and Gwyn headed for a free table, but Snape intercepted them.

"Miss Griffiths, you will partner Mr. Malfoy. *You*," he said, without looking at Harry, "will work with Finch-Fletchly." Harry moved to the table directly behind Malfoy where Justin was already setting up his cauldron. He was actually a bit surprised; normally, Snape took any opportunity possible to pit him against Malfoy. He couldn't understand the sudden change in tactics.

"Allow me," Malfoy said, jumping to his feet and pulling out the stool for Gwyn. He held out his hand to take her backpack as well, but she clung to it, scowling. Harry watched as Malfoy put his hand possessively on the small of Gwyn's back, guiding her to her seat, and he noticed how Gwyn went rigid at his touch. Somehow, Malfoy had convinced Snape to partner them together, Harry concluded. That was the only explanation.

Snape gave them a short lecture on medicinal potions and set them to brewing a simple pain potion, but Harry hardly heard him. He was too busy keeping an eye on Malfoy, who seemed rather busy himself, keeping an eye on Gwyn.

"Did you read my letter?" Malfoy hissed at her as soon as Snape was occupied on the other side of the room. Gwyn stared resolutely forward, organizing their potions ingredients on the table in front of them. "Did you?" he pressed.

"I read it," she replied. "And then I burned it." Malfoy's face went slightly red, and his mouth set in a hard line.

"I was trying to apologize for offending you," he said darkly.

Gwyn shrugged, still refusing to look him in the eye. "You'll have to try harder than that," she said softly. "Apologies usually include the word 'sorry' somewhere in them."

Harry grinned to himself.

He slowly turned his attention back to Justin and agreed to begin chopping their rosehips, but a sharp movement caught his eye. He glanced over in time to see Malfoy reaching across the table in front of Gwyn, and Gwyn pulling back suddenly in disgust.

"Keep your hands to yourself, Draco!" she said loudly.

"Miss Griffiths!" Snape snapped. "Kindly keep your mind out of the gutter and on the task at hand." Gwyn glared at him, but quickly returned to her potion.

Malfoy grinned, and then he noticed that Harry was staring at them.

"Like to watch, Potter?" he hissed over his shoulder. Gwyn glanced back at him, but her expression was unreadable. Malfoy smirked. "Perv!" he spat.

Harry seethed. He was about to retort Gwyn caught his eye again. Her eyes were taking on that hard look again, and her expression made Harry reconsider. She obviously wanted to fight her own battles.

"Harry!" Justin whispered urgently. "Those rosehips have got to be more even. Look, this one's twice as big as the rest."

Harry nodded vaguely and continued chopping. Snape was hovering nearby, surveying the class with a look of intense distaste but avoiding Harry entirely.

"Let me do that," Malfoy said to Gwyn, his voice oozing like black honey. "Hands as lovely as yours shouldn't have to touch such things." He reached in front of her again to gather the ingredients she'd been preparing, and she shirked away from him, leaning precariously back on her stool.

"I'm perfectly capable of dissecting a few gallbladders," she said in a fierce whisper, attempting to take the jar back from him. "I'll just pretend they're your face."

"Nonsense. I said that I'll do it," Malfoy replied coolly, moving the jar out of her reach. Gwyn glared at him and tried to snatch the jar away again.

Her hand closed over the glass, and Malfoy smacked it, hard. Harry jumped at the sound and Gwyn stared at Malfoy in disbelief, clutching her hand to her chest.

"I said *no*." His voice was low and hard, and his eyes shone like pinpricks of blue flame. He flicked his eyebrows up once, and one side of his mouth curved into a hideous half smile. He leaned slightly towards her, his arm reaching out for her, his hand resting on her thigh. "You're very beautiful when you're angry," he said.

Abruptly, Gwyn launched herself up off of her stool, knocking it over in the process. It crashed to the floor loudly, and anyone who hadn't already been watching the interaction began to stare. Gwyn took several steps away from Malfoy, still staring at him in horrified disgust, and brushing her leg furiously where he had touched her.

"What is going on here?" Snape demanded, his robes swirling around him as he descended on Gwyn and Malfoy.

"I can't work with him!" Gwyn shouted. She never took her eyes off of Malfoy's face, which was carefully poised and composed.

"Miss Griffiths," Snape replied, "part of this exercise is learning to brew potions as part of a team -- a scenario which is not uncommon in the real world."

"I don't care!" Gwyn said fiercely, finally tearing her eyes away from Malfoy to glare at Snape. "I'll work with anyone else, but not with him! You can't make me!"

Snape stared at her silently for a moment, his face twisting into an ugly smirk.

"Oh, but I can," he said in a voice barely above a whisper. "You will take your seat, Miss Griffiths, or you will leave my classroom. Permanently."

Harry watched intently as Gwyn seemed to weigh her options. Just then, Malfoy stood up, bent over, and righted her stool. He yanked it back a few inches, loudly scraping the feet across the floor, and motioned for her to sit. Reluctantly, and still looking like she was about to spit nails, Gwyn took a step towards him. She glared, and Malfoy moved a pace backwards, holding his hands in the air in surrender, but wearing an expression of malicious triumph. Gwyn slumped down onto the stool.

"I believe Miss Griffiths has finished her histrionics," Snape said nastily, "so the rest of you gawking voyeurs can return to your work."

"Professor," Malfoy piped up in his most sycophantic voice. "When Gwendolyn jumped up so suddenly, I accidentally added far too much Flobberworm bile. I'm afraid our potion is ruined."

Snape walked briskly forward and leaned over to peer into the cauldron. He stirred it once or twice experimentally before flicking his wand and vanishing the entire contents.

"You are quite right Mr. Malfoy. Since it was an accident, you and Miss Griffiths may stay after and start again."

Malfoy smiled broadly. "Thank you, sir," he said. He glanced over at Gwyn and raised his eyebrows at her again. Gwyn turned towards Harry, her expression horror-stricken. Her eyes were clearly pleading with him for help, but he didn't know what he could do.

Snape turned and walked towards him, his black eyes trained on Finch-Fletchly, but as he passed their cauldron, he stopped.

"What exactly is this?" he demanded, pointing at their potion. Harry and Justin stared up at him. "Do you not see in the instructions that the liquid should thicken and become viscous?" Justin nodded slowly. "Does this look thickened to you?" Snape demanded, ladling out some of their very watery potion and allowing it to slop back into the cauldron.

"Medicinal potions must be brewed with unfailing precision," Snape barked. "Lives are on the line." He flicked his wand, and the cauldron emptied before their eyes. Justin stared down at the empty cauldron dumbly, but Harry glared up at Snape, who was finally looking him in the eye.

"May we start again, Professor?" Justin asked weakly. Snape gave him a contemptuous look.

"Incompetence is not an accident, Mr. Finch-Fletchly," he said nastily. "The rest of you, bring a sample of your potions to my desk as you leave."

"I'm sorry!" Harry exclaimed softly as he and Justin began packing up their things. "I didn't mean to get you into trouble too."

Justin shook his head. "It's my fault. I wasn't paying attention, and when she started yelling, I stared stirring it clockwise instead of counterclockwise." He frowned unhappily. "Bloody potions," he grumbled.

"Bloody Snape," Harry added.

Harry loitered outside the potions dungeon for more than an hour before Gwyn and Malfoy emerged at last. Malfoy was saying something low and soft to her as they walked, but as soon as the door to the classroom banged shut, she broke into a run up the corridor. Malfoy laughed.

Harry stepped out of the corner where he'd been hiding and Gwyn practically collided with him.

"Harry!" she exclaimed. Her face was flushed, and her eyes were large, pupils wide like a frightened cat. She came to a stop so quickly that she nearly overbalanced.

"Are you ok?" he asked, putting his hands on her shoulders to steady her and keep her from falling over. She shied away from his touch.

"I'm -- I'm fine," she said sharply. "You didn't have to wait for me." She began to march determinedly up the corridor towards the Great Hall.

"I wanted to make sure you were alright," Harry said, beginning to feel a bit foolish for hanging about for so long, when he was obviously unwanted.

Her pace slowed, and he took a few long strides to catch up to her. She glanced up at him sideways.

"Thanks," she said at last. "For waiting, I mean. But I think I'd just like to be alone now." They stopped as they came to a junction in the corridors.

"OK," Harry said, feeling rather annoyed, but trying not to show it. "If you're sure you're OK."

Gwyn nodded and took a few steps away from him. Then suddenly, she turned and rushed back. Her arms went around his neck and she buried her face in his shoulder. Instinctively, Harry wrapped his arms around her and held her close. They stood that way for a moment before Gwyn gave him a final squeeze and backed away.

"What was that for?" Harry asked.

Gwyn shrugged. "For being you," she replied. "And for being nothing like Draco Malfoy."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN -- Hogsmeade

October waxed and waned in the blink of an eye. The days sped past in a blur of lessons, revisions, and abysmal Quidditch practices that Harry would rather have forgotten. The first Quidditch match against Slytherin was only a little over a week away and Harry had never felt less prepared for a game in his life. In addition, he was doing so poorly in Potions that he and Justin had started spending their spare time with Gwyn and Padma, doing extra revision; Hermione had so far refused to work with them on the grounds that Snape might think she was cheating again. Despite the extra time he was putting in, Harry lived in constant fear that his next lesson with Snape might be his last, ending all hope for a career as an Auror.

But today, all of that was forgotten. It was Halloween, and all of the students had been given the day off from lessons in order for the older years to have their trip to Hogsmeade. Hermione had been scandalized that they would cancel lessons for such a thing, instead of just sending them to Hogsmeade on a weekend, but Harry and Ron had quickly convinced her to stop her griping and just be grateful that the Hogsmeade trip wouldn't cut into her regularly scheduled weekend revision time; this seemed to mollify her slightly.

Harry waited nervously in the entrance hall by the huge doors which had been thrown wide to let in the unseasonably warm October breeze. Filch was standing at the foot of the stairs, list in hand, ready to turn away any students who had not had their permission slips signed. Harry dug into his pocket and produced the small square mirror Remus had given him. He'd taken to carrying it with him in the off chance that Remus would try to contact him, but he hadn't actually spoken to him since his tirade weeks before. Glancing at his reflection, he self-consciously ruffled his messy hair as he stared in the direction he knew the Ravenclaw dormitories to lie. Someone giggled at him.

Harry quickly shoved the mirror back into his pocket and turned to find Ginny giving him a rather indulgent look as she munched on a piece of toast.

"You just make it worse when you rumple it up like that," she said with a smirk.

Harry reddened slightly, but put on a confident smile. "I dunno," he said, "I think it makes me look kind of cool... Like I just came in off my broom or something."

Ginny snorted in a very unladylike way. "Er... All right then..." she said sarcastically.

Harry chanced another glance towards the Ravenclaw wing. "So, are you going to Hogsmeade with Dean?" he asked casually.

Ginny shook her head. "I broke it off with him." Her eyes widened seriously. "But *don't* tell Ron, OK? He'll just blow up and make a scene."

"I don't think so," Harry said truthfully. "He'll probably be glad to see you well chuffed of him."

Ginny looked somewhat guilty. "Not when he hears why I'm chuffed of him," she said quietly. Harry looked at her curiously and she continued. "I caught Dean and Lavender snogging in the common room two nights ago," she said with a dramatically disgusted roll of her eyes.

Harry made a sympathetic noise.

"Oh, I'm OK with it," she quickly assured him. "Dean and I were pretty much just friends at this point anyway -- but I don't know how Ron will react. I swear, he's worse than Fred and George when it comes to worrying about my love life!"

Harry raised an eyebrow. "Since when have Fred and George cared a bit about your love life?"

Ginny giggled unexpectedly.

"Since they finally figured out what to do with girls, I think--" she said with a laugh, "--I mean, other than play pranks on them or knock Bludgers at them. And now they've figured out what girls are for, they don't want anyone else thinking that way about me!"

Harry had to laugh at the thought of two identically scandalized faces.

"What can I say?" Ginny continued. "I guess Weasley men are just late bloomers. Speaking of which..." She made an emphatic gesture with her head to the doors of the Great Hall, and Harry saw Ron and Hermione coming towards him.

"Not a word!" Ginny hissed as she turned to go.

"Oy!" Ron called to Harry in a teasing voice. "Where's your *date*?" Harry gave him a dirty look.

"She'll be along. Where's yours?" Ron looked taken aback by this, and Hermione rolled her eyes at them, trying to conceal a grin. Just then, a knot of Ravenclaw girls made their way into the entrance hall. Harry noticed Luna, Mandy Brocklehurst, and Padma, who waved genially, before he spotted Gwyn chatting animatedly with Cho Chang. His stomach lurched rather unpleasantly.

"Since when have those two been so friendly?" he muttered. Hermione sighed.

"Stop being paranoid," she whispered. As they approached, Cho said goodbye to Gwyn and moved with the rest of her friends towards the door. As she passed, she caught Harry's eye, and for a moment it looked like she wanted to say something, but then she simply tossed her hair and moved on.

"Hi Ron," Luna called loudly, waving. Ron blushed slightly and gave a half-hearted sort of wave before he noticed Gwyn and his jaw fell open.

"What are you done up for, then?" Ron asked in apparent disbelief as Gwyn came to stand with them. She was wearing blue jeans and a long flowing sort of tunic that was the color of rust red earth and looked to have been draped together rather than actually sewn by any pattern. Her hair was done up on her head in a sort of attractively haphazard pile with little wisps and curls of pink and blonde spilling down all around her face, and she had painted intricate shades of rusty brown colors and glitter around her eyes, down the sides of her neck and shoulders, and even on the backs of her hands. Two funny little bobble ended antennae sprouted out of her wild hairdo as well, but the most impressive part of her outfit was the wings.

"It's my costume," she replied with a grin. "I'm a Sonoran Desert Pixie." Ron goggled at her. She sighed, and the large iridescent dragonfly wings sprouting seamlessly from the skin between her shoulder blades gave a little flutter. "You act like you've never seen a pixie before," she chided Ron. "Don't you have them over here?"

"I've just never seen one quite so... big," he retorted.

Gwyn giggled. "Everyone at the Conservatory dresses up for Halloween," she explained, "even the professors. We have a big party and a costume contest with prizes for the best ones. I got honorable mention two years ago for my mad butcher costume. I stuck a fake hand in the pocket of my butcher coat and a friend of mine charmed it to wave at people." Ron continued to stare at her like she was speaking another language. "It's a lot of fun," she insisted with a wise nod.

"I got these by mail order ages ago," she continued, indicating the wings, "and I wasn't about to let them just sit in my trunk for another whole year." Ron stared at her with unabashed incredulity.

Hermione seemed to be trying very hard not to look as dumbfounded as Ron. "Why a pixie?" she asked, attempting a smile.

"I thought that would be obvious," Gwyn replied with a wicked grin, "what with my decidedly pixotic disposition."

"I like it," Harry said, feeling stupid as soon as the words left his mouth. Ron smirked, but Gwyn smiled brightly at him.

"Thank you, Harry," she said, and Harry felt heat rising to his face.

"Er, ready to go then?" he asked quickly. Gwyn nodded. The four of them headed down the steps towards the town, and, as they walked, Hermione kept slowing down and making Ron walk with her so that Harry and Gwyn could get well ahead.

They passed through the gates to the Hogwarts grounds and Harry began to feel a little nervous. He wouldn't admit even to himself how many times he'd pictured this exact moment over the last few weeks -- though admittedly, without the pixie wings. So far, everything was going fine, but he was afraid that as soon as he opened his mouth he would somehow ruin it as he'd inadvertently done with Cho.

"So!" Gwyn said cheerfully, smiling at all the students openly gawking at her costume. "Where are you taking me?"

"Anywhere you want to go," Harry replied, relieved that he didn't have to open the conversation.

Gwyn grinned. "I want to go everywhere."

They started at Honeydukes which was fit to burst with Hogwarts students. Gwyn bought quite a large quantity of Chocolate Frogs claiming that she needed to catch up on her card collecting, and Harry stocked up on Honeydukes' chocolate bars, as more Dementors had been spotted recently and he wanted to be prepared in the unlikely event that they decided to visit Hogwarts.

Next they went to Zonkos, which, Harry explained, was brilliant, but not nearly as good as Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes in Diagon Alley. Then they visited the post office to look at all the owls, and Gwyn promptly went up to the Post Wizard and asked how much it would cost to send a coconut by swallow from Africa to England. She thought this was terribly funny, and the Post Wizard asked them to leave.

A dark bank of clouds was gathering on the horizon as they scurried out of the post office and a chilly wind had begun to blow. Harry was beginning to think that dating wasn't as difficult as everyone made it seem. From the moment he had admitted that he had asked Gwyn to Hogsmeade, Ron had taken every possible opportunity to wind him up about it. Girls were, Ron assured him, completely mental, and dating was very dangerous to a bloke's health and sanity. Yet Harry found that he was having such a good time with Gwyn that he could hardly remember why he had been so nervous about it all in the first place.

Gwyn stopped for a moment and turned away from him to look into a store window. Harry stared at the nape of her neck where tiny little ringlets of blonde hair were curling against the bare skin of her tan brown shoulders, and his insides began to feel like molten lead. She turned around to smile at him. *Oh right...* Harry thought as he blushed furiously.

"Let's go see the Shrieking Shack," Gwyn suggested eagerly as they walked up the high street towards the other end of town. Harry grinned to himself and agreed. They made their way to a hill just outside of the town where one had an unobstructed view of the rickety wooden house set off all by itself in a brown field. Gwyn shivered as she stared at it.

"Is it true that it's the most severely haunted structure in Britain?" she asked, inching a little closer to Harry and out of the wind.

Harry shook his head, thinking of Remus and the rest of the Marauders. "You sound like you've been talking to Hermione," he suggested.

"Oh no," Gwyn said with a little laugh. "No, Cho told me about it. She's been telling me about lots of stuff, actually."

Harry's voice caught in his throat. "Really?" he managed to squeak, hoping he sounded more interested than afraid of what Cho might have to say to Gwyn.

"Mmm hmm..." Gwyn replied, leaning even a little closer to Harry so that her shoulder was touching his as they stared at the shack. "She's got a lot of very interesting things to say." He could feel a slight breeze every time her pixie wings gave a little flutter, and he felt the color rising in his cheeks. He wondered if it was due to Gwyn's proximity or her teasing him with what Cho had said.

"So how come you never mentioned that you two were an item?" Gwyn asked casually. Harry tried to think but found that his mind had gone rather inconveniently blank.

"Er..." he managed feebly.

"Only, she told me that you weren't very nice to her," Gwyn continued nonchalantly, still watching the Shrieking Shack intently, as though she expected one of its much vaunted ghosts to appear at any moment. "She said you asked her out to Hogsmeade and then mentioned half way through that you had a date with Hermione after."

"That's not what--"

"And that's when I laughed right in her face and told her she was crazy. I mean really, the thought of you and Hermione..." Gwyn turned her head to smile up at him and he could see the barely contained laughter in her eyes. He smiled gratefully. "Anyone with an ounce of common sense can see that the two of you are best friends," she continued, "and Hermione's much too intelligent to mess that up by letting you having a crush on her." Harry's smile faltered a bit in his confusion while Gwyn laughed and grabbed his hand.

"I'm just messing with you, Harry," she assured him. She grinned and Harry grinned back, laughter finally bursting out of his throat. They stood quietly staring at the shack and holding hands for a few minutes more before Harry felt Gwyn shiver against his arm.

"Cold?" he asked. Her blouse seemed to be made of very thin material, and it left her shoulders necessarily bare to make room for the wings. As pretty as it was, Harry thought, it wasn't terribly practical.

"A bit," she admitted, hugging his arm close to herself without letting go of his hand.

"Then let's go and get something warm to drink," Harry suggested. Gwyn nodded.

"Only if you promise not to take me to that place Cho told me about -- Madam Pudding-Foot's or something? Sounded gawd awful to me..."

"It is," Harry agreed, grinning. "We'll go to the Three Broomsticks instead." They began walking back towards town hand in hand. Harry realized that he was beaming idiotically, but he couldn't quite find the conviction to care. So what if people saw him grinning like a jack-o-lantern? That just meant that they would also see the amazing girl -- er, pixie -- currently walking through town with him. Harry's smile broadened even a bit more; he couldn't quite believe how brilliant it was just to be holding her hand.

As they made their way up the high street towards the Three Broomsticks, Harry noticed that the bank of dark clouds had rolled in rapidly and now blocked out almost all of the remaining afternoon sunshine. It was no wonder Gwyn was cold. He was beginning to feel rather bold, and wondered if he dared put his arm around her shoulders like he had that time she'd had the Freezing Draught in potions.

He was just pondering how to accomplish this with the pixie wings in the way, when a hint of movement in a dark alley they were passing caught his eye. He paused slightly in his gait, and Gwyn turned to look up at him just as a voice shouted, "*Stupefy!*"

Harry watched in horror as Gwyn crumpled forward into his arms.

It took a split second for Harry to realize what was happening, and in that second, panic shot through him, paralyzing him as though he'd been struck by lightening.

The Honeydukes' bags tumbled to the ground. Harry struggled to reach for his wand and support Gwyn at the same time. "*Expelliarmus!*" the voice cried just as Harry's fingers closed around his wand. It flew from his grasp. Harry's stomach turned as he heard it clatter to the cobblestones behind him.

A man emerged from the dark alley. He had close cropped brown hair and was wearing a dirty brown muffler over most of his face; only his eyes were visible above it, staring at Harry intently. He crossed the distance between them in a few long strides.

A single thought flooded Harry's mind: *get your wand!* Hitching his arm under Gwyn's, Harry turned, dragging her with him, and scanned the ground frantically.

The man was upon them in seconds. He grabbed Gwyn roughly out of Harry's grasp and threw her to the ground. Harry swung his fist at the attacker and caught him in the gut. Unfortunately, the much bigger man barely flinched before slamming Harry's jaw in return. Harry's head snapped back and his world exploded in a supernova of white hot pain. He tumbled to the ground.

He needed his wand if he was to have any chance. Closing his eyes in concentration, supplication, desperation, something, he threw his arm out behind him and shouted "*Accio wand!*"

Miraculously, he felt its smooth wood fly into his hand, but the stranger was already there, kicking it away from him again and then kicking him hard in the ribs. Harry heard something crack. He doubled over and gasped for breath as the man hauled him roughly to his feet. Harry struggled, but he was dizzy from the punch and busy choking on his own tongue, still unable to get any oxygen to his brain.

"Harry?" someone shouted.

Harry blinked, trying to focus his eyes, and twisted to look over his shoulder.

A hand yanked on the front of his jumper while the other slapped him hard across the face.

"*Expelliarmus!*" Neville's voice shouted. The spell was so powerful that it knocked Harry and his attacker apart. The man's wand clattered into the darkness of the alley. Harry hit the ground again painfully and something flew out of his pocket. He stared blearily at the little square mirror where it skidded to rest a few feet away.

"Remus," Harry breathed, then much louder, "Remus!"

"*Stupefy! Stupefy!*" Neville screamed.

Harry tried to push himself up off the pavement. A pair of hands grabbed him roughly and dragged him to his feet, catching him in a powerful vice-grip. The world spun wildly as he was forced upright, and he thought for a moment that he might be sick.

Harry strained against the arms, flailing and scratching, but his strength was sapped by pain. A confusion of voices met his ears as he was dragged towards the alley.

"...where?"

"Hogsmead! Hurry! ...s'got Harry!"

Harry started shouting, hoping that he could lead someone to him, but the words garbled into wordless anguish before they left his throat. A hand clamped roughly over Harry's mouth and he did the first and only thing he could think of: he bit it. The man bellowed loudly and smacked him hard upside the head again. Harry's glasses clattered to the ground and he slumped forward, sagging with defeat, still caught in the vice.

Suddenly there was a loud crack, and Harry wondered feebly if he'd broken another bone. A stronger, louder voice cried, "*Stupefy!*"

Harry grunted in pain as the hands released him and he hit the ground again. He decided blearily that the ground wasn't a bad place to be once he got there. At least it wasn't moving.

Disjointed noises met his ears. Someone scrabbling on the cobblestones, someone shouting, running feet, a crack. He had trouble assimilating them into anything coherent, clinging to consciousness by the barest of threads.

Struggling into a semi-upright position, Harry found he was staring at Gwyn where she was still lying in the street. One of her wings was bent at an odd angle beneath her, and the other was twitching feebly. Desperately, Harry tried to crawl towards her. He only managed to drag himself a few feet before things went blissfully black.

The world came rushing back like water through a funnel. Neville was talking to him, trying to ask him something, handing him his glasses and his wand. Harry allowed Neville to help him into a sitting position and immediately regretted it as his head throbbed painfully. The world began to steady, though, and up began to distinguish itself from down.

"What happened?" he managed groggily. Neville started to answer, but was cut off by a concerned shout.

"Harry!" Harry looked around and saw Remus running towards them, robes flapping behind him, wand drawn and at the ready.

"What are you doing here?" Harry asked, staring at him dumbly.

"Are you hurt?" Remus asked at the same time.

"That guy punched him!" Neville exclaimed excitedly, his round face red and his eyes wide. "He kicked him in the ribs too!"

"Are you OK?" Remus asked Neville. Neville nodded quickly.

Remus squatted down to Harry's eye level. "Can you walk?" he asked. Harry nodded, and immediately wished that he hadn't. Remus and Neville took him under each arm and helped him to his feet.

"Gwyn!" Harry choked suddenly, remembering.

"She's out cold," Neville said, "but she's breathing and everything."

"She'll be fine," Remus assured them as they walked over to where she was still lying in the street. "But we have to get you back to Hogwarts right now." Remus reached into his pocket and pulled out a battered, bent quill. He held his wand over it and muttered, "*Portus.*"

"Can you stand on your own?" Harry nodded uncertainly, and Remus and Neville let go of him. He wobbled slightly, but managed to remain upright. The throbbing had spread from his head down to his abdomen where he'd been kicked. Even breathing hurt.

Remus stooped and scooped Gwyn up from the cobblestones as though she were no more than a rag doll.

"You're going to have to carry her," he said urgently to Neville, "but just for a moment. I'll send you straight to Madam Pomfrey." Harry frowned and thought vaguely that he ought to be the one carrying Gwyn as Neville flushed crimson, holding out his arms to accept her inert frame from Remus.

Remus held out the quill. "I'll be right behind you," he said quietly. Harry and Neville grasped the quill at the same time, and Harry felt the peculiar tugging behind his navel that he associated with traveling by portkey. The world blurred sickeningly and, just as quickly, refocused inside the Hogwarts hospital wing.

Madam Pomfrey let out a little shriek as they materialized; Harry wobbled and almost collapsed. She must have helped him to a bed, but all he could really remember was telling her to look after Gwyn first.

"Ow!"

"Be still and it won't hurt so much!"

When Harry woke, the first thing he saw was a rather blurry Madam Pomfrey bending over him, prodding him painfully in the side with her wand. A glob of thick greenish light emerged from her wand and entered his skin.

"Wassat?" Harry asked, still feeling a little groggy.

"You've a broken rib," she said sharply. "Looks like you've broken it before, too. But you'll live." Harry groaned. At the moment, he didn't feel as though he wanted to live. At the moment, he felt as though he'd been run over by a rampaging hippogriff.

Memories began to stir inside his foggy brain. "Gwyn!" he gasped suddenly, trying to sit up. Madam Pomfrey tutted reassuringly, but pushed him firmly back down onto the pillows.

"There, there, Mr. Potter! She's fine. It was quite a stun she suffered, but she's sleeping it off. She'll be right as rain in no time." At that moment, the curtains by his bed shifted, and Remus came around them, his face drawn and concerned.

"How is he, Poppy?" he asked, moving to Harry's bedside. Madam Pomfrey made a small harrumphing noise.

"As good as can be expected. Honestly, Remus, he's in here almost as much as you were at his age." She patted Remus on the shoulder as she left the two of them alone. Remus sank down onto the side of Harry's bed, head in his hand.

"All right, Harry?" he asked tentatively, looking up.

"All right," Harry replied. "How did you find me?"

Remus smiled wearily. "Neville told me where you were. It's a lucky thing he was there, or no one would even have known you were gone until they found Gwyn."

Harry nodded. He was beginning to remember details of what had happened, but everything was still slightly out of focus. "He saved my life," he said softly. "His disarming charm was so strong it threw me and the other guy half way across the street! It slowed him down. That's the only reason I was still there when you got there."

"Seems we taught him well," Remus said mildly.

"Did you catch the guy?" Harry suddenly demanded, groping for his glasses on the bedside table and shoving them onto his face. Remus frowned and shook his head.

"I'm sure I hit him at least once, but he just shrugged it off. He found his wand and disapparated before I could do anything about it."

Harry frowned, trying to remember. "Who was he?"

"I was rather hoping you could tell me," Remus replied. "I never got a good look at his face."

"Neither did I," Harry said sullenly.

"But it's the same tactic the other man used in Diagon Alley; he attacked the person you were with first, before going after you."

"It doesn't make any sense," Harry frowned. "I mean, why go to all that trouble? He could have killed me right then if that's what he'd wanted, same as the other guy; they both caught us completely by surprise. Why didn't he just kill me?"

Remus gave him a hard look. "I don't know, Harry," he said finally.

At that moment, Madam Pomfrey bustled back over with a bottle of potion in each hand and what looked like a large pewter hand mirror. She set the bottles on the table and proceeded to hold the mirror out over Harry's bare chest.

Only it wasn't a mirror. Harry strained to watch, fascinated, as the mirror seemed to show layers of skin and muscle being pulled back to reveal what was underneath. Finally, when the mirror showed the white bands of Harry's ribs, Madam Pomfrey said "Stop."

"Well," she concluded after a moment, "that looks all right then. I've healed the break, Mr. Potter, but I'm afraid you'll be sore." She moved the mirror away, and its surface once again reflected the room rather than Harry's insides. "You're going to be quite colorful too; that fellow gave you some nasty knocks." She held the mirror up, and Harry was slightly shocked to see a massive purple bruise blooming spectacularly across one side of his face.

"I'm going to give you something for the pain now," Madam Pomfrey continued, pouring out a measure of one potion, "and I'll give you a sleeping draught to take later on." Harry obediently swallowed the potion given to him, and felt the tightness in his chest ease almost immediately. He sighed slightly with relief.

Remus smiled. "Good stuff, that," he said wryly. Madam Pomfrey scoffed and moved away.

"What about Gwyn?" Harry called after her.

Madam Pomfrey gave him a searching look. "She's not awake yet, but you may wait with her, if you like."

Harry nodded gratefully.

Remus stared at him for a long moment. "You're something else, Harry," he said at last.

Harry rolled his eyes. "Well," he said cynically, "if you're talking about me getting my arse kicked up one side and down the other..."

"No," Remus replied, smiling, "although you did quite a good job of that too."

Harry snorted.

"You're always worrying about other people before yourself." Remus shook his head. "That's your mum in you, I expect. She was always worrying more about us than about herself..."

Harry could feel that Remus wanted to say more, but the man held his tongue. Instead, he stood abruptly and patted Harry awkwardly on the shoulder.

"I'd best go tell Dumbledore that you're still alive," he said, turning to leave.

"Remus!" Harry stopped him. Remus gave him an odd look, and Harry flushed, suddenly embarrassed.

"I was thinking, since you're already here and everything, you might want to have dinner with me. If Dumbledore says it's OK, of course... We could lift some food from the kitchen and camp out in a classroom somewhere." He paused. "But if you'd rather not..."

Remus searched his face for a moment. "But it's the Halloween feast tonight, Harry."

"Oh. I forgot about the feast," Harry replied gloomily.

Remus shrugged. "You should go," he said firmly. "I seem to recall that Hogwarts put on a pretty good spread for Halloween. You don't want to miss that."

"Well," Harry said slowly, "why don't you come with me? You could sit at Gryffindor table with us." Remus' eyes brightened slightly. "I'm sure Ron and Hermione would like to see you too," he added.

Remus smiled at last. "I'll ask Dumbledore," he said.

When he was gone, Harry gingerly swung his feet over to the side of the bed and tested his weight. He didn't feel nearly so dizzy as he had when he'd first arrived, and when he stood, he decided that the pain potion was indeed pretty good stuff, as he only felt a few dull aches and pains.

He found his jumper, tee shirt, and trainers waiting for him neatly in a chair at the end of the bed, with his amulet and wand lying neatly on top. He stuffed the amulet and his wand into the pockets of his jeans and reached for his tee shirt at once, meaning to dress, when he saw movement out of the corner of his eye. In a bed across the infirmary, Gwyn was beginning to stir.

She groaned quietly and Harry hurried over to her bedside. She was terribly pale. Someone had removed her pixie wings and her elaborate hairstyle was in disarray. She was looking around fitfully when he approached.

"Harry?" she said, sounding timid and unsure.

"It's me," he said quickly, dropping to his knees by her bed and grabbing her hand. "Are you OK?"

"What happened?" she asked fearfully. "Where are we?"

"It's OK," he assured her soothingly. "We're in the hospital wing at Hogwarts." He paused, wondering if he really ought to tell her what happened or not, but decided there was nothing for it. "We were attacked. In Hogsmeade."

Gwyn frowned at him. "Attacked?" she repeated. She tried to sit up and groaned, putting her hands to her head.

"I'll get Madam Pomfrey," Harry said quickly, rising to his feet and turning to locate the nurse.

"No," Gwyn said, lying back. "No, I'm all right. I just sat up too quickly." She looked up at him. "Please don't go." She offered him her hand again, and he took it, sinking back to his knees.

"Harry," she said slowly. "Where on earth did you get that scar on your back?"

Harry began to blush as he realized that he still hadn't put his shirt on. Then he frowned and tried for a moment, rather comically, to see over his own shoulder in an attempt to appear indifferent to the fact that he was half naked.

"Oh that," he said in a strained voice, as he tried to see the thin jagged scar that grazed his shoulder blade. "That's where the dragon got me in the Tri-Wizard tournament fourth year. I summoned my broom to get past her and as I was feigning left, she swung right and..." he trailed off as Gwyn started to laugh. "What's so funny?"

"Are you kidding?" she asked, grinning. He gave her a rather confused look and her smile faded slightly. "You're not, are you? I swear Harry, you should take up poker. I can never tell if you're telling me the truth or just pulling my leg. A dragon got you?" Harry nodded solemnly and Gwyn shook her head in disbelief.

"What about that one?" she asked, pointing to his right arm where it lay on the blankets next to her. A round shiny pink scar, roughly the size of a galleon was faintly visible just above the elbow.

"That's where the Basilisk bit me," Harry replied. "That was back in second year. It was going around petrifying people and then Ginny..." He trailed off again at her incredulous expression. "I swear," he said seriously. "I'm not making this up."

"Well if a Basilisk bit you, why aren't you dead?" Gwyn asked pointedly.

Harry shrugged. "Fawkes healed me," he replied. "That's Dumbledore's Phoenix. Their tears have healing powers, you know."

"All right, then what about that one?" she asked, pointing just below the Basilisk scar where an angry brown line sliced the blue veins just visible through his pale skin. "Wait," she said, "don't tell me. That one is from a Harpy you tried to teach to tango."

Harry shook his head solemnly.

"No," he said simply. "Nothing so exciting as that."

Gwyn watched him, her expression changing from sarcastic amusement, to curiosity, to concern.

"What then?" she asked.

Harry reached up and ran his thumb over the slightly raised skin of the scar thoughtfully.

"That's where Peter Pettigrew, the man who betrayed my parents, stole my blood to resurrect Voldemort," he said quietly, his voice devoid of emotion.

Gwyn's eyes widened, but as she opened her mouth to speak, the door to the infirmary banged open loudly.

They both turned to look at the man who had just entered the room. He was blonde, tan, and Hollywood handsome, and he was dressed in a suave set of pinstripe black dress robes that hung open over a matching pinstripe business suit, a royal blue shirt, and a solid black tie.

"Daddy?" Gwyn exclaimed, her voice thick with disbelief. Harry was suddenly gripped by a very strong urge to run and hide, and definitely to put a shirt on.

CHAPTER NINETEEN -- The Halloween Feast

"Gwyn, honey!" Mr. Griffiths rushed across the infirmary, his robes billowing impressively behind him. He moved with the athletic grace suggested by his physical appearance and brushed past Harry, hardly even noticing him, eyes only for his daughter.

"I came as soon as they flooed me," he exclaimed, grasping her hand in one of his and laying the other across her forehead. "Are you alright? Where does it hurt?"

"I'm fine, Daddy," Gwyn said, still sounding a little shocked. "You didn't have to come--"

"Nonsense! It's no trouble. The Minister understood entirely."

Harry started to back away from Gwyn's bed. He had crossed his arms across his chest, embarrassed by his shirtlessness, and wished that he could just quietly slip away.

"Who did this to you, Gwyn?" Mr. Griffiths demanded. "I want names!"

"I... I don't know, Daddy. I never saw him. Harry--"

Mr. Griffiths whirled around and seemed to see Harry for the first time.

"You!" he exclaimed with surprise. "You're Harry Potter." Harry opened his mouth, but no sound came out. Mr. Griffiths turned back to Gwyn.

"What were you doing with Harry Potter?" he asked, as though Harry weren't standing right there.

"We're friends Daddy," she said reproachfully. "I wrote you that in my letters." Mr. Griffiths frowned.

"Did you? Well I don't like it, not one bit. Gwyn, that boy gets into more trouble than a bull in a china shop."

Harry felt like he was wearing his invisibility cloak, the way Mr. Griffiths was talking, but he feared that if the irate father ever did focus on him for more than a moment, he would wish he really did have the cloak.

"It's not like we were out *looking* for someone to hex us," Gwyn said tersely as she raised herself up on one elbow. "Gawd Dad, you act like I got stunned on purpose!"

"Don't be absurd, Gwyn," Mr. Griffiths said dismissively. He turned and glanced over his shoulder. "Albus, what exactly are you planning to do to find the lunatic who hexed my little girl?"

Harry followed Mr. Griffiths' gaze towards the door where Dumbledore was standing, placidly watching the scene unfold.

"I had intended to start by looking for him or her," he replied frankly.

Mr. Griffiths glowered. "This whole business is queerer than a three dollar bill," he grumbled. He took a step towards Dumbledore and shook his index finger at him. "Now listen here: I want to know who is hexing my daughter and what you're going to do about it, Albus. And you!" he exclaimed, turning and looking Harry in the eyes at last, his finger still jabbing at the air, punctuating each of his sentences. "What's the matter with you, boy? Haven't you got any sense? Don't just stand there in your birthday suit! Put a shirt on for Merlin's sake!"

Obediently, and with great relief, Harry scurried over towards the curtains that separated his bed from the rest of the infirmary and pulled his tee shirt over his head. He quickly followed it with his jumper and shoes for good measure.

"My first priority has been to ensure the safety of all the students still in the village, though my staff is, even now, working to uncover the identity of Harry's assailant," Dumbledore replied evenly. "As soon as we know anything more I will, of course, inform you--"

"Harry's assailant? Harry's not lying in a hospital bed looking paler than a snowman's ghost!"

Harry emerged from his curtains fully dressed, but still feeling naked before Mr. Griffith's glare.

"Dad," Gwyn said firmly, sitting up in her bed, "Harry got me back to school. If it wasn't for him--"

"You wouldn't have been in danger in the first place," Mr. Griffiths retorted. "He's dangerous, Gwyn."

"He's not!" she yelled suddenly. "You've got him all wrong, Daddy! If you would just listen..."

"Gwyn, from what the Minister's been telling me, this boy spins a yarn faster than a sheep on steroids. I don't know what he's been telling you, but--"

"Well the Minister is wrong!" she shouted back.

"I've had just about enough of this," Mr. Griffiths said abruptly in a very stern tone. "You," he barked, looking at Gwyn, "are coming with me. And you," he turned to glare at Harry, "are going to stay the hell away from my daughter from now on. Is that clear?"

Harry just stared at him dumbly.

At that moment, Dumbledore stepped forward. "Harry," he said in a firm tone, "I believe Remus is waiting for you in my office. Why don't you escort him down to the Great Hall, please." Harry nodded gratefully and hurried towards the door.

"John," Dumbledore continued evenly, "I see no reason why you or Gwyn should need to leave. If you would like to--"

"I'm going to take Gwyn to Saint Whatsits in London and have her checked out. We'll need to use your floo, Albus."

"I assure you," Dumbledore said calmly, "that Madam Pomfrey is fully qualified and extremely capable. I would trust my very life with her, as I would the lives of all of my students."

"Well, no offense meant, ma'am, I'm sure, but I'd just feel much better with a licensed healer and not some school nurse."

Harry didn't hear Madam Pomfrey's reply, as the infirmary door banged shut behind him.

"Meeting a girl's father is never exactly fun," Remus mused as he and Harry wandered down towards the Great Hall. "but I think that little altercation qualifies as one of the worst I've ever heard." Remus had been waiting for him outside Dumbledore's office, and Harry had immediately launched into a narrative of the events in the Hospital Wing.

Harry groaned. Living it had been bad. Describing it was almost worse. "Why didn't I just put my shirt on when I got up, like a normal person?" he asked no one in particular. Remus smiled slightly.

They reached the entrance hall and Remus paused. Students were filing past into the feast, and more than a few of them were openly staring at him. He stood quite still for a moment, watching them, hands clasped behind his back. Harry noticed that his knuckles were white.

"Harry," he said uncomfortably, "you do realize that having a former professor to dinner – or a werewolf, for that matter -- isn't exactly going to make your classmates think very highly of you..."

Harry scoffed. "Don't worry," he said simply. "It won't be any worse than what most of them think about me already." He grinned. "The only people who matter are going to be thrilled to see you."

Remus raised an eyebrow, unconvinced, but followed him into the brightly lit Hall.

The room looked brilliant, as always. The requisite cloud of live bats was fluttering about the rafters, the sound of their wings and their little squeaks a soothing background to the hubbub of noise from the excited student body. Hagrid had had an unusually abundant crop of pumpkins that year; every available surface was covered in them, and the several dozen that could not find a surface floated about lazily just above their heads. The faces carved into them were all different, and several winked, stuck out their tongues, or waggled their eyebrows at Harry as he passed.

"Harry! Professor Lupin!" Hermione was out of her seat waving and shouting as soon as they entered the Hall. Harry shot Remus a grin as they made their way down the row to where Ron was pushing several smaller kids out of the way to make room for the two new arrivals.

"Harry, are you alright?" Hermione asked concernedly as he and Remus approached. "Neville's been telling us what happened."

Harry nodded and glanced at Neville who was blushing with embarrassment. "Neville saved my life," he answered solemnly, which caused Neville to redden even more.

"Professor Lupin helped," Neville said shyly.

"You look terrible, mate," Ron offered, staring at Harry's impressive bruises. "Got right clobbered, didn't you?"

"Thanks, Ron," Harry grumbled.

"Are you going to eat with us, Professor?" Hermione asked as Harry lowered himself gingerly onto the bench next to her; the pain potion was beginning to wear off, and the stiffness was setting in.

"If it's alright with you all," Remus said. Hermione smiled brightly and nodded. Remus took his place at the table and met Harry's eye, flashing a rare, utterly genuine smile.

"Remus?" The group turned and looked up at Professor McGonagall who was standing over them, staring at Remus with unabashed surprise. "Decided to stay for dinner, have you?"

Remus grinned broadly at her. "Harry invited me," he said. "And I make a point never to turn down an invitation to dinner." The expression of easy enjoyment, whether at the look on McGonagall's face or the feast and company around him, made Remus look years younger. Harry smiled at the change.

Professor McGonagall looked skeptical. "You wouldn't prefer more adult accommodations?" she asked mildly, gesturing to the staff table.

"Certainly not," Remus replied indignantly. "As I'm not a professor here any longer, I'd quite like to have dinner with my housemates and make up for the shocking amount of neutrality I displayed during my tenure. Up Gryffindor!"

He looked around hopefully at Harry and the others who were staring at him blankly.

Professor McGonagall put a hand to her forehead. "Oh for pity's sake, Remus, *don't* get that started again! I've only just gotten over the headache that cheer gave me when *you* were in school."

"Up Gryffindor!" Ron chimed in enthusiastically. Remus blinked up at her innocently.

Professor McGonagall shook her head at them, a very poorly hidden smile playing at the corner of her lips, before she headed up to the staff table to begin the feast.

As the food appeared and they all began helping themselves to baked chicken, leg of lamb, roast duck, boiled potatoes, pumpkin rolls, and roasted vegetables, Ron groaned ecstatically and said, "Ah, get in!" lovingly to the potatoes.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "How's Gwyn?" she asked Harry.

Harry shrugged. "She's alright. But her dad wanted to take her to St. Mungo's."

"Bet Madam Pomfrey loved that," Ginny snorted.

Remus shook his head. "She won't let her go without a fight. Poppy Pomfrey is nothing if not proud of her work."

"Slow down, Ron," Hermione scolded. "You'll put someone's eye out at the rate you're going!" Ron paid her absolutely no attention.

"Hang on," Remus said, suddenly very serious as he looked up and down the table, "are there any of those... There are!" He motioned for a terrified looking second year to pass him a platter of pumpkin pasties. "Oh, I've *missed* these," he said rapturously tipping three or four onto his plate. "They were always James' favorites too. One year --" He broke off suddenly, looking at Harry, who had been listening as intently as the others.

"Go on," Harry encouraged him, "unless you'd rather not..."

"Actually," he said in a surprised voice, and smiled again, wistfully. Harry glanced over at Ron, who had slowed his shoveling of food so as to better hear over his own chewing, and at Hermione, whose eyes looked oddly misty. He wondered if she was feeling well.

"Right," Remus said, taking an overly large bite and then proceeding with the story, "so James and I lifted the pasties from the kitchen, and then Sirius nicked them from us. He had the bright idea to levitate them up through the girls' dormitory windows and drop them on them while they were sleeping..." He paused, smiling fondly at the pumpkins overhead. "Only he discovered it's a bit easier said than done when you can't see to aim the pastry. I've never seen James so appalled as when he found out his entire stash of pumpkin pasties was splatted across the walls and ceiling of the girls' dormitory." He glanced over at Hermione, who was giving him a wide-eyed reproachful stare and quickly added, "Of course, Lily gave us all detention for it, even though James and I hadn't anything to do with the actual levitating. She seemed to think that providing Sirius with ammunition was crime enough to fit the punishment."

The rest of the evening passed pleasantly and much too quickly for Harry's liking. Remus told them several more stories of the pranks and mayhem he and his friends had got up to while they were at school, several of which involved stealing food, and all of which were almost too good to be true.

All around the hall, Harry couldn't help but notice that students were randomly turning into large yellow canaries; bubbles erupted from various ears, and some sprouted long moustaches.

"Looks like Fred and George's mail order business is really doing well," he mused as a third year up the table from them squawked as she burst out in yellow feathers. Neville looked suspiciously at the tart he'd been about to eat, and quickly set it to the side of his plate.

"Well, I don't think it should be allowed," Hermione said, crossing her arms in front of her chest as she watched the poor girl molting while her friends picked yellow feathers out of their puddings.

"Oh come on, Hermione," Ron moaned. "They're just having a bit of fun. It's not like anyone's bought a portable swamp yet."

Hermione shook her head. "You don't know that, Ron. We might go on rounds tonight and find ourselves wading through a corridor of muck, like last year. And then who do you think is going to have to help clean it up?" Ron rolled his eyes and shrugged as he reached for another tart. Neville reached for one at the same time.

"Er... Not that one, mate," Ron said quietly. Neville went slightly green and apparently decided he wasn't hungry.

As the feast wound down, Harry found he didn't want it to end. Despite the serious bruises mottling his face and body, he was feeling better than he had in a long time. He and Remus stayed at the table talking until most of the other students had left the Hall. Hermione, Ron, and Ginny had all

gone off as well; the head boy and girl had given all the prefects extra rounds to discourage any Halloween shenanigans.

"You should get to bed," Remus said at last, draining the last drops of his pumpkin juice. "You've had a rough day."

Harry nodded solemnly.

"What about you?" he asked. "I mean, will you stay here, or will you go back to London?"

Remus regarded him thoughtfully for a few moments. "I'll probably ask Dumbledore for a spare room for the night," he said at last. "I'm sure he'll want to hear your account of the attack first hand, and he and I have other things to discuss as well."

"Things about the Sect?" Harry asked quietly.

Remus nodded. "Convincing them to let me in is proving harder than I had expected," he said solemnly. "They want proof of my dedication to the cause."

"What kind of proof?" Harry asked.

Remus shrugged. "That's what I need to talk to Dumbledore about," he replied evasively. "Oh! I almost forgot."

Remus dug into a pocket in his robes and produced the square mirror. "Don't want to lose this," he said. "You'll need it to tell me how the Quidditch match turns out next week."

Harry took it gratefully. "Thanks," he said. "For everything, I mean."

Remus nodded. "Now. To bed! Or I'll have to find Professor McGonagall and tell her there's a student out past curfew."

Harry feigned an unimpressed yawn and rolled his eyes, but made his way upstairs pleasantly exhausted and smiling.

/br The next morning at breakfast, Harry found a note on his plate which told him to report to the headmaster's office at ten o'clock. So, after forcing down a bowl of porridge, he made his way to the twin gargoyles that guarded the entrance to Dumbledore's office. They were much larger than the variety that they'd caught on the roof in Hagrid's class, but something about their eyes made Harry wonder if they weren't more than just statues.

"Harry?"

Harry turned and saw Neville hurrying up the corridor towards him. "Did you get a note too?" Harry nodded. "Oh good!" Neville exclaimed, relieved. "I thought I was in trouble or something."

"I don't think so," Harry said, turning back to the gargoyles. "He just wants to talk to us about yesterday, I expect."

Neville nodded and they stood silently for a moment, regarding the impassive gargoyles.

"Er... How do we get in?" Neville asked quietly.

"Maybe we just ask," Harry suggested. He took a few steps forward.

"Hallo," he said, not sure what to expect. "We've got an appointment with Professor Dumbledore."

The gargoyles didn't move.

On his previous visits to the Headmaster's office, he'd been escorted, or by chance guessed Dumbledore's password. He did not trust that he would be able to guess it again.

"Er, hello?" he said again, taking another pace forward to where he knew the entrance to be.
"Professor Dumbledore?"

"Just what do you think you're doing, Potter?"

Harry whirled around to see Professor Snape striding up the corridor towards him. Neville backed up a few steps involuntarily.

"I'm waiting for Professor Dumbledore," Harry said defensively. He glanced at Neville. "We have an appointment."

Snape sneered at him. "And you thought that addressing a brick wall was the most expedient way to go about gaining the headmaster's attention?" He didn't wait for an answer, instead he turned to the gargoyles and said, "Marsh-Mellow."

Without so much as another look at Harry or Neville, he swept into the now-visible entry and up onto the moving spiral staircase. Harry's stomach sank. It wasn't just an unhappy coincidence that Snape happened to be passing. Warily, Harry followed him up the stairs with Neville trailing at his heels, his mouth open and eyes wide with awe.

Harry arrived at the top, surprised to see Professor McGonagall already seated beside Remus, and Snape striding to the Headmaster's desk. He had expected this meeting with Dumbledore to be private, or, at the very most, to include Remus and Neville, and the additional interrogators made him feel vaguely wary. Professor Dumbledore was seated behind his desk looking rather weary, Harry thought, and avoided his gaze.

"Ah. Severus, boys, right on time. Please, have a seat." Harry and Neville took the empty chairs next to Remus, and Snape conjured his own straight-backed wooden chair on the other side of Professor McGonagall. Neville was staring around at the office in wonder, and Harry realized it must be his first visit. Fawkes was perched in his customary position just behind Dumbledore's left shoulder. Harry smiled at the Phoenix, and he thought he saw Fawkes incline his head slightly at him before the bird turned to preen his tail feathers. Professor Dumbledore peered avidly around at each of them over the tops of his half-moon spectacles before reaching for a tin on his desk.

"Lemon drop?" he asked genially, passing the tin to Neville. Neville's hand shook, but he took one and passed the tin on. When the sweets reached Snape, Harry was amused to see that he took one, but didn't eat it. Instead, he rolled it back and forth between his thumb and forefinger.

"Harry, Neville," Dumbledore said at last, "I've asked Professors Snape and McGonagall to sit in on our conversation this morning. I hope that is all right with you?"

Harry glanced over at Professor McGonagall, who was looking pinched and stern, and at Snape, who was looking annoyed and bored, and nodded. Beside him, Neville managed to do the same.

"Remus has already informed us of what he saw," Dumbledore continued. "I would, however, like for the two of you to answer a few more questions, if you can."

Harry nodded, the lemon drop slowly dissolving in his mouth. Neville just stared.

"Harry, when did you first see the man who accosted you in the street?"

"He was in the alley," Harry said slowly, trying to remember everything in detail. "We were just walking by and I turned to say something to Gwyn and I saw him in the alley. He stunned Gwyn and then he came after me."

"Did he try to stun you?" Dumbledore asked.

Harry shook his head and frowned. "No. He used *Expelliarmus* to disarm me, but after that, he didn't try another spell."

Dumbledore frowned and turned to Remus and Neville. "Did either of you notice whether the man cast any other spells?" They both indicated they had not. Dumbledore's frown deepened as he turned back to Harry.

"Did you recognize the man who attacked you?"

"No," Harry replied at once, "but I didn't get a very good look at his face. He was wearing a muffler." Dumbledore glanced over at Neville.

"I d-don't know who he was either," Neville stammered.

Dumbledore peered at each boy closely. "You're certain?"

Harry frowned. "Yes," he repeated. "I never saw him before."

"If I might ask, Professor," Professor McGonagall interjected, "I would like to know how the attacker knew the children would be in Hogsmeade on this date."

"I may be wrong," Remus said, "but in my day, Hogsmeade weekends were fairly common knowledge. The townspeople usually knew when we were coming."

"Well," McGonagall replied with only the faintest trace of amusement, "we only thought it fitting to give them fair warning that you and your classmates would be descending on them."

"The date of the Hogsmeade trip was changed," Dumbledore explained to Remus, "so that fewer people outside the school would be aware of the students' presence in town before they arrived."

Harry had a sudden revelation. "You changed the date because of me," he said flatly.

Dumbledore nodded. "It seemed safest not to advertise your time away from the school." He sighed. "But it was not a closely guarded secret. There are many ways the information could have been leaked into the wrong hands."

"If the attacker wasn't privy to the knowledge firsthand," McGonagall said stiffly.

"A spy," Remus mused, glancing for the briefest moment at Dumbledore. Harry's mind raced. He could think of several people who would be a good candidate for a Death Eater spy, namely Malfoy, Malfoy, and -- oh yes -- *Malfoy*.

"While that may or may not be true," Snape said suddenly, "I doubt very seriously that this attack was mounted by a Death Eater."

Remus frowned at him.

Professor Snape gave a perfunctory shrug of his narrow shoulders. "The Dark Lord's followers are not known for their subtlety; they rely on surprise, brute force, and strength of numbers to achieve their ends. With the exception of a few key minds in his innermost circle, they are a loutish lot who curse first and ask questions afterward. Besides," he turned to look directly at Harry, "if he wanted to take Potter alive, history has shown that he has far more effective ways of obtaining the boy's presence than kidnapping."

Harry felt his face begin to burn, but Snape continued his monologue unperturbed. "That this attack was executed to a more sophisticated plan and with a minimum of collateral damage suggests the attacker was not a common Death Eater. And despite his patently dubious powers of observation, even Potter would have recognized any of the more elite, and thus more capable, of their ranks."

Harry tried to absorb this as Neville frowned deeply. If the attacker wasn't a Death Eater, did that mean that there was someone *else* after him as well? He clenched his fists at his side in frustration. Why couldn't they all just leave him well enough alone?

"Are you sure they were after Harry?" Neville said suddenly in a very small voice. Everyone in the room turned to stare at him, and his face went the color of Fawkes' feathers. He ducked his head quickly and mumbled an apology.

"What do you mean, Neville?" Dumbledore asked kindly. Neville glanced up, his shoulders hunched up about his ears as though he were trying to make himself as small as possible.

"Maybe Harry was just in the way," Neville squeaked unhappily. "I mean, isn't Gwyn's dad a politician or something? Maybe the guy was after her."

The adults were silent for a long moment.

"Longbottom may have a point," Snape said at last, although it seemed to pain him to admit it.

"We just assumed..." McGonagall said.

"But the other attack--" Remus protested. Harry wished that one of them would finish their sentences.

"These are all questions which require much consideration," Dumbledore said at last. "However, I believe our first priority should be the question of Harry's safety."

"Clearly he is at risk the moment he leaves the castle walls," Snape said icily. "Therefore it seems only logical for him to be confined to the castle for the remainder of the year."

Harry inhaled sharply and almost choked on his remaining sliver of his lemon drop.

"Don't be absurd," Professor McGonagall retorted calmly, but a spot of color appeared on both of her cheeks. "That wouldn't be practical. He has lessons that take place outside on the grounds. Not to mention Quidditch."

Professor Snape regarded her coolly. "I see. The boy's safety is paramount -- so long as it doesn't interfere with Gryffindor's winning streak."

"But," Neville said, sounding slightly braver, "no one could come on school grounds without you knowing about it, could they Professor?" All eyes were on Dumbledore who was studying his hands impassively.

"Peter did it," Remus said quietly. "He was here for three years. And Sirius..."

"Not to mention Crouch," Snape added. Professor McGonagall opened her mouth, but Professor Dumbledore cut her off.

"I see no sensible way to confine Harry to the castle without it interfering unduly with his daily life here," Dumbledore said coolly. "We will save that course of action for when we have no other choice."

"What about a body guard?" McGonagall suggested.

"What?" Harry exclaimed, unable to control himself. McGonagall gave him a stern look that clearly said he should be seen and not heard at this point. He didn't care. He could just see Malfoy's face if he showed up to class trailing a body guard along behind. *That your nursemaid, Potter? Need a nanny now, do we?*

"No," Harry said firmly.

"It might be safest," Remus said carefully, as he glanced at Harry. Harry glared at him; he had thought at least Remus would be on his side.

"I don't need a body guard," Harry said determinedly. "That's ridiculous."

"Is it?" Dumbledore asked softly. Everyone turned to look at him, but he was looking directly at Harry, and Harry met the headmaster's eyes for the first time. He wondered vaguely if Dumbledore were trying to read his mind before ducking his head and shifting uncomfortably in his chair.

"John Griffiths has already assured me that he will be asking the Minister to assign a contingent of Aurors to guard Hogwarts until his daughter's attacker is caught," Dumbledore said at last. Professor McGonagall gave a disgusted little snort. "We may be able to use this to our advantage and postpone any more drastic measures indefinitely."

Professor McGonagall wrinkled her nose and made another little noise of disapproval, but she rose to go, and Snape followed her. Harry took this to mean that he wouldn't be getting a body guard any time soon, and that the meeting was over. Harry and Neville also stood to go.

"Harry," Remus said, calling him back. "I have to leave as soon as I've had a few more words with Dumbledore."

"Oh," Harry said, "right." They studied each other uneasily for a moment before Remus put his hand out. Harry took it and shook it awkwardly.

"Take care of yourself, Harry," Remus said, smiling slightly. "And don't forget what I said about the mirror."

"I won't," Harry assured him. He turned and left the office, a feeling of emptiness filling him as the spiral stairs took him back down to the main corridor. *Sirius wouldn't have thought I needed a bodyguard...*

Harry shook his head, trying to dislodge the troubling thoughts.

It wasn't quite lunch time, and as Harry didn't feel particularly keen on facing the large pile of schoolwork waiting for him in the common room, he found himself wandering the halls aimlessly. As he turned a corner, he realized that his feet had taken him to the hospital wing.

At the same time, the door to the infirmary opened, and Gwyn emerged. "Gwyn!"

She turned and smiled brightly when she saw him, looking almost relieved.

"You're a sight for sore eyes," she said. Harry tried to jog up the corridor towards her, but quickly gave up on speed when his bruised ribs complained painfully. "I only just got back from St. Mungo's. I was going to try to find you."

"Are you all right, then?" Harry asked.

Gwyn rolled her eyes. "Of course I'm all right. Just another example of my father's rather inefficient brand of parenting: making a big deal out of all the wrong things at all the wrong times." She sighed. "He made such a scene at the hospital, ordering people around and yelling at everybody. They kept me overnight for 'observation' just to make him happy; as soon as I had a room he was off to the Ministry again."

"I'm sorry," Harry said awkwardly, not quite sure what else he could say.

Gwyn shrugged. "All in a day's work for my dad," she replied. She glanced up at Harry. "Listen, I was going to head up to the dormitory now. The hospital shower gave me the creeps..."

"I'll walk with you if you like," Harry offered, and Gwyn smiled.

They walked along in silence for a while, Gwyn leading the way up corridors and around corners that Harry had hardly ever visited. Usually, silence with Gwyn didn't bother Harry any more than silence with Ron or Hermione did, but now the quiet was making his palms itch.

"Did you get into more trouble with your dad because of me?" he asked at last, just to break the tension.

Gwyn gave a little half-hearted laugh. "Oh yes. I received an embarrassingly detailed lecture on the birds and the bees, thanks to you, and was expressly forbidden from even so much as looking at you ever again." Harry frowned.

"He told me that so far his research had led him to believe that you were a delinquent and a menace, that you had dangerous people after you because of it, and that if I could get my schedule changed so that I didn't have to have any classes with you, well, I should do that too." Harry stared at her. She was giving him a rather apologetic smile. Her own father thought he was a mental case and a freak. He didn't understand how she could be taking this so lightly.

"I guess I should leave you alone then," Harry said more loudly than he'd meant to, stopping abruptly halfway up the staircase they were climbing. "I wouldn't want you to get in trouble with your dad."

"Look Harry," she said, the smile vanishing from her face. "Obviously I don't know the whole story about you still, but I don't think my dad does either--"

He stared at her and realized with a shock, that she believed what her dad had been telling her.

"It's fine," he snapped. "I understand!" But in truth, he felt anything but fine or understanding. Angrily, he turned on his heel and started back down the stairs.

"Harry!" He didn't stop. He didn't want to look at her any more; it would only make everything even harder.

"Harry!" Her voice was pleading. Reluctantly, he stopped and turned back. She hurried down to meet him, stopping a few steps above.

"Look," she began quietly, "I'm sorry about my dad. I know he can be a total jerk, but you have to consider where he's coming from. In America, you're like an urban legend -- a baby who defeated a dark wizard that no one else could kill? You have to admit, to someone who doesn't know you really exist..." She paused, her eyes searching his. "I can see why my dad wouldn't believe it," she said finally.

"I don't care what your dad believes," Harry answered hotly. He took a deep breath to steady himself. "What do you believe?" She smiled at him fondly, a look of relief passing over her face. "I believe that you're a good guy, Harry, and I believe that you would never lie to me or do anything to hurt me." She took another step down so that they were now only one step apart. They were looking at one another almost eye to eye. "And I believe that, against my better judgment, I'm doing the one thing I swore to myself I would never do."

"What's that?" Harry breathed, unable to take his eyes off her. Her blue eyes were wide and shining; she had pulled her hair back into a pony tail, but a few wisps had escaped and were floating effortlessly around her face. He found it was very hard to stay angry when she was looking at him like that. It was hard to concentrate on much of anything other than the warm feeling that was filling him.

She gave him a very small smile. "I'm falling for a wizard," she whispered conspiratorially. Harry's heart leaped against his ribs and for a split second, he prayed she meant him. Gwyn leaned down from her step and a wisp of her hair tickled his nose as she pressed her lips softly against his cheek. As she drew back, he inhaled and smelled the sweet scent of her -- vanilla and something spicy, like sage. He tried to think of what to say, but his mind didn't seem to be working properly, so he let his instincts take over.

Reaching up with one arm, he put his hand on her waist and drew her back down towards him until her face was level with his. She did not resist. Closing his eyes, he found that he didn't even have to think about what to do as his lips met hers. One of her hands found his shoulder and squeezed it gently. This was no peck on the cheek, he found himself thinking, this was a Kiss. It was the longest thirty seconds of his life, and he wished it could have gone on forever.

But then it was over. They broke apart and he noticed that she was blushing furiously. She smiled nervously at him and gave a little mock sigh.

"Now you've really done it," she said softly. Below them, a rush of noise signaled that lunch was beginning, and that at any moment, the stairs would be flooded with hungry students heading down to the Great Hall.

She retreated back up a few steps. "I'll see you later then, Harry?" she said softly.

"Right. Yeah," he said, still feeling a bit dazed. He watched her until she was completely out of sight. "See you."

CHAPTER TWENTY -- Rebound

Harry watched a drop of water run off the end of his nose from which it dripped onto scarlet Quidditch robes already soaked through. If the dormitory weren't quite so far away or the stairs quite so steep, he would have gone upstairs and changed into something decidedly less drippy and cold. However, it had taken every ounce of his strength just to walk from the Quidditch pitch up to Gryffindor Tower, so instead, he sat slumped on the squashy sofa in front of the roaring fire in the common room and dripped.

"I... can't... move..." Ginny moaned from where she was sitting next to him. Her flaming red hair hung in dark, limp strands around her face, and occasionally a droplet would collect at the end of one of the strands only to splash down onto her shoulders. Harry wanted to nod in agreement, but he felt that if he moved his head forward at all, it would pitch down onto his chest and stay there.

"Someone put me out of my misery," Andrew groaned from an armchair nearby. He was curled in a fetal position after having pulled a groin muscle during a particularly impressive, but ineffective attempt to lob a Bludger at Ron's head. "Just kill me. Kill me now."

"You should go to the hospital wing," Katie said wearily. "Let Madam Pomfrey put us all out of your misery." She was slumped in the other armchair with her head tilted back towards the ceiling. Her long brown pony tail was hanging over the back of the chair and dripping rhythmically into an ever growing puddle on the carpet.

"Fnrg...," Jack said. He was lying face down in front of the fireplace where he had collapsed with his long arms and legs sprawled out in all directions. His sandy blond hair was matted with rain and mud where he'd taken a sort of swan dive off his broom into the muck. Will, who was sitting on the floor with his back up against the sofa, nudged the prostrate figure with his foot. "Fnrg!" Jack repeated emphatically.

"You lot look like death warmed up," Hermione said briskly as she approached them from the stairs to the girls' dormitories. Harry managed to turn his head enough to see her through water-blurred glasses.

"Is that what I think it is?" he asked hoarsely.

Hermione grinned and nodded, handing him a bottle of Butterbeer.

"You are my personal hero," Harry said, staring reverently at the bottle in his hands and thinking that he had never seen anything so beautiful in his entire life. He took a long drink and felt the warm liquid sliding down into his stomach, beginning to thaw him from the inside out.

"Where did you get -- never mind. I don't care where. You're an angel," Katie said gratefully to Hermione as she accepted the bottle passed to her.

"Ron and I stocked up in Hogsmeade on Friday," Hermione explained as she passed them each a bottle, pausing momentarily before setting one next to Jack's head on the hearth. She handed one to Andrew who looked up at her seriously through his dark brown hair, now almost black with rain and hanging down in front of his eyes.

"I would ask you to marry me right here and now," he said sincerely, "but I think I am permanently disfigured and wouldn't make a very good husband." Hermione blushed and giggled.

"But where's Ron?" she asked, holding up the last bottle of Butterbeer. A collective grumble went up from the Gryffindor Quidditch team.

"He's still out on the pitch," Ginny growled.

"What?" Hermione exclaimed. "But it's pouring. And dark."

"Try telling him that," Will said softly before taking a long pull of his Butterbeer. Hermione looked to Harry, who sighed.

"He thinks he needs more practice," he said unenthusiastically. "He tried to convince us all to stay out there with him, and when we wouldn't, he bewitched a Quaffle to fly at him..."

"Only he kept losing it in the rain..." Ginny giggled. She hiccupped a little and took another sip of Butterbeer.

"Why does he think you need more practice?" Hermione demanded as she stomped over to the nearest window. There was no way she was going to be able to see the pitch, but she stared out into the blackness regardless.

"Not us," Harry corrected her. "Him. And he doesn't need more practice either. He's just being paranoid."

"I got a couple of goals past him," Will said, a small note of triumph in his high voice.

"And you know how he gets," Katie continued. "Once he lets one in..."

"It all goes to hell," Andrew finished. He shifted slightly so he could pick up Jack's Butterbeer and groaned. "I hope he washes away."

"Andrew, where's your team spirit?" Katie chided without enthusiasm.

"Team spirit my sodding great arse," Andrew said with feeling.

Hermione came away from the window and perched on the arm of the sofa next to Harry, giving him a questioning look. Harry closed his eyes.

"We've been trying out these drills he came up with--" he began.

Another collective groan went up from his teammates.

"Don't even say the word drill," Ginny commanded. "It makes my head hurt."

"Are the drills helping?" Hermione asked hopefully. Harry opened one eye and gave her a baleful look. She bit her lip.

"When Ron says 'drill', what he really means is 'elaborately slow and torturous recipe for the elimination of teammates,'" Andrew complained. "Too bad we can't aim his drills at the opposition. He's completely and totally insane."

"He makes Oliver look normal," Katie agreed.

"Oh I don't know," Harry protested wearily. "He's just a bit... zealous."

Hermione frowned sympathetically. "Still," she said after a moment, "don't you think someone should fetch him?"

"Be our guest," Katie said morosely. "I'll even lend you my broom."

"And take a mac," Andrew suggested, wringing out the sleeve of his robes onto the floor. "I think it's supposed to rain." A large rumble of thunder rolled through the castle as though to emphasize his words.

"Oof," Ginny said as she fell over onto Harry's shoulder with a rather wet squish. "I'm going to stay right here and sleep for a week."

"Can't," Will said sagely. "Lessons tomorrow." Another unanimous groan. Hermione got up again and went back over to the window, hugging her arms to herself.

"He'll be all right," Harry called to her. "Once he's cooled off a bit, he'll realize that he's being a monumental git and come inside." Hermione gave him a doubtful look.

They were all silent for a while.

"So, you think we're going to win on Saturday?" Katie asked. No one answered.

"It can't be as bad as all that..." Hermione said.

Still, no one answered.

"Well, I'm off to bed," Katie said at last, forcing herself up out of the armchair. "I've Snape first thing in the morning, and I might just cry if I have to look at his slimy face on any less sleep."

Will got up as well and wandered away quietly towards the boys' dormitories. Harry watched him go. It was true that he had scored twice during their practice, but the boy was unpredictable. He would run the drills perfectly five or six times in a row, then change his mind one time and confuse the other Chasers by trying to score for himself. When it worked, Harry thought, you couldn't fault him: it worked. But when it didn't...

Andrew gingerly began unfolding himself from the armchair, two empty Butterbeer bottles sitting at his feet. He winced dramatically as he limped over to Jack and kicked him unceremoniously in the leg. Jack lifted his head an inch or so off the floor and said, "Die."

"Fine," Andrew replied, "carry your own sorry arse up the stairs." When Jack didn't reply, Andrew shrugged and limped towards the boys' spiral stairs.

Harry blinked slowly at the fire. Ginny had the right idea. Her breathing had become slow and regular, and she was warm against his shoulder. Though his arm, he noticed with dismay, was quickly falling asleep. He shifted slightly to try to get her off of him, and she made a little disgruntled noise. Eyes still shut, she grabbed his arm and moved it so that it was slung over her shoulder, her head now resting on his chest. Harry sighed and gave up trying to shift her, just glad that the blood was returning to his fingers.

He glanced over and saw that Hermione was still standing by the window, staring out into the rain lashed darkness. "He's fine," Harry said at last, causing Hermione to start. "He's just stupid, that's all."

She laughed a halfheartedly and came back over to the fire, picking up a book from her stack on the table as she passed. "Well, we knew that," she said, dropping into Andrew's vacated armchair and leaping up again with a sudden, "Eww!" She muttered a quick Drying Spell before settling back into the chair.

"You two look comfortable," she said wryly, gesturing at Ginny.

"She's like a cat," Harry yawned. "She can sleep anywhere." Hermione just shook her head, still smiling.

"You gonna wait up for Ron, then?" Harry asked.

Hermione blushed a little and opened her book. "Might as well..."

Harry nodded and yawned again. He thought vaguely that he ought to wait up as well, and while the 'wait' was quite easy in his current state, the 'up' was less so. Before long, his eyelids had dropped and his chin was resting comfortably on top of Ginny's head.

"Ahem," a very disgruntled sounding voice said, and Harry's eyes snapped open.

It must have been quite late, as the fire had died down and the common room had emptied out. Jack had hauled himself up to bed at some point during the interim, and left only a puddle on the hearth. Hermione was snoozing soundly in her armchair nearby, book lying open in her lap.

"Ron," Harry said groggily as he blinked up at his friend. Ron looked like a drowned rat; his hair and robes were plastered to him as though he'd lost an argument with the giant squid.

"What's all this, then?" Ron demanded, gesturing wildly in Harry's general vicinity. Harry frowned at him, trying to figure out what he was talking about, when Ginny snorted and began burying her head deeper in Harry's shoulder.

"Ah," he said.

"Ah?" Ron repeated incredulously. "AH?" Hermione started awake at the sound of his voice.

"Ron!" she exclaimed. "Finally!" She jumped up out of her chair. "Are you insane staying out in weather like this?"

"No. I for one would like to win the match on Saturday, and if we mean to do that, we all have to be our best! I needed more practice."

Hermione put her hands on her hips. "Harry didn't seem to think you needed more practice. And what good are you going to do the team if you catch cold from spending all night on your broom in the rain?"

"Oh, what do you know?" Ron demanded shortly. Hermione stared at him.

Harry quickly hoisted himself and Ginny into more of a sitting position and pushed her head roughly off of his shoulder.

"Huh?" Ginny said, jarring awake. She wobbled slightly and blinked slowly. Ron was staring daggers at them both.

"Come on Ginny," Hermione huffed, grabbing both of Ginny's hands and pulling her to her feet, "it's time for bed." Hermione threw a rather disappointed look over her shoulder at Ron before she led Ginny up the stairs.

"What are you thinking?" Ron asked as soon as the girls were gone.

"Huh?" Harry asked, rubbing his eyes behind his glasses.

"Ginny!" Ron continued, pointing at the girls' staircase. "What were the two of you doing snuggling on the sofa? She's my sister -- she's practically *your* sister! Besides which, she has a boyfriend."

"She doesn't have a boyfriend," Harry muttered as he got to his feet.

"What?"

Suddenly, Harry was wide awake and painfully aware of what he'd just said. Ginny was going to kill him.

"Nothing," he said quickly, hoping to cover for his gaffe. He turned towards the stairs.

"What d'you mean she doesn't have a boyfriend?" Ron demanded. "What about Dean?"

Harry sighed. "She broke it off with Dean," he said quickly. "But you can't let on that you know! She made me promise not to tell you."

At the news that his sister was no longer involved with one of his roommates, Ron's face lit up happily. Unfortunately, it fell as he realized that his sister had *broken up* with one of his roommates.

"What happened?" he asked darkly.

Harry winced. "Why don't you ask her?" he suggested. "Or Dean? Ask Dean."

"What *happened*, Harry?" Harry heard something in Ron's voice that reminded him dangerously of Mrs. Weasley, so he relented for the good of Gryffindor Tower's sleeping residents.

"She caught him snogging Lavender on the side."

Surprisingly, Ron seemed to take the news rather well. He contemplated Harry's words for a moment, nodded slowly, and then turned towards the stairs.

"I'll kill him," he said in a frighteningly calm voice.

"No!" Harry cried, grabbing the back of Ron's robes. "You can't! I promised her I wouldn't tell! *She'll kill me!*"

Ron frowned. He seemed torn between his best friend's life and his sister's virtue. Harry pleaded silently with him until he sighed and shrugged out of Harry's grasp.

"All right," he said crossly. "I won't let on that I know." Harry took a deep breath, relieved. It was premature.

"But that still doesn't explain the sofa," Ron grumbled. "I thought you were with Gwyn. If you're stringing Ginny along --"

"Woah!" Harry exclaimed quickly. "No, no, no. Not stringing Ginny along. We just fell asleep. She's like my sister, right? I'm definitely -- well, probably... er... I'm with Gwyn."

Ron narrowed his eyes at Harry. "Does Ginny know that?" he asked suspiciously. Harry nodded vigorously and vehemently hoped that Ginny did.

Ron considered for a moment and then nodded, apparently satisfied. "She's a right pain. Falls asleep in the weirdest places. One New Year's she nodded off on top of my left leg and Mum wouldn't let me budge her. Got pins and needles like you can't even imagine..." Relieved, Harry followed Ron up to the dormitory, only half listening to his waffle, but when he saw the venomous look that Ron gave to the curtains of Dean's four-poster, he worried that this wasn't the end of the affair.

"It isn't fair," Gwyn said firmly the next night, as she and Harry sat working with Padma and Justin in the library. "And I've half a mind to report it to the headmaster."

"And when you do," Harry countered, "Snape will just find some other way to take it out on me."

Padma sighed. "It isn't as if your potion was even that far off, this time," she said, consolingly. "I was watching you, and yours wasn't nearly as bad as Pansy Parkinson's; hers looked like something my mum's kneazle might cough up."

Harry shook his head. "Doesn't make any difference," he said sullenly. "Snape vanishes my potions indiscriminately these days."

Justin chewed on the end of his quill thoughtfully. "What you need," he said slowly, "is a way to make your potion vanish-proof."

"Yeah," Harry agreed unenthusiastically.

"That's not a bad idea," Padma said. "You could just use a variation of the Imperturbable Charm..." Suddenly she jumped out of her chair and headed off towards the stacks.

Gwyn sighed. "And we've lost her. Thanks a lot, Justin. I hope you know where to look for the history of blood thinning serums, or we're not going to get anything done until she gets back."

Justin shrugged sheepishly and reached for Padma's book.

When Harry walked into the Potions dungeon two days later, however, he not only had a full fourteen inches written on the history of potions affecting the blood -- two inches longer than required -- he was also armed with a cauldron that Padma assured him would allow him to add things to it, but would allow nothing to be taken away, magically or otherwise, until he ended the incantation.

Hermione waved gloomily as she moved to her seat at the back of the classroom. Harry and Gwyn opted for desks on the opposite side of the room, as far away from Malfoy and the rest of the Slytherins as possible. As they began working on their potions, Malfoy dug anxiously into his bag for a scrap of parchment and began scribbling wildly.

"Oh no," Gwyn whispered as he shoved the note at Pansy and indicated for her to pass it on. Pansy scowled, but did as he asked. When the parchment reached Gwyn, she took it, looked directly at Malfoy, and tore it in half without even opening it. She then fed the pieces to the fire under her cauldron. Harry watched with unabashed glee as Malfoy's face began to turn red and his eager expression became an ugly scowl.

Gwyn smiled wickedly at Malfoy and very deliberately reached across her desk to take Harry's hand. Just then, Pansy leaned over and began whispering in Malfoy's ear. All at once, the color drained completely from his face, along with any sign of emotion at all. Harry wondered what Pansy had said.

"Potter! Griffiths!"

Harry's attention snapped back as he looked up, horrified to see Professor Snape staring down disdainfully at his and Gwyn's interlocked fingers. He quickly let go and dropped his hand into his lap.

"A classroom is not the place for such blatant public displays," Snape drawled. Gwyn opened her mouth as though to respond.

"No, Sir," Harry interjected quickly before she could say a word. Snape sneered at Harry's uncharacteristic acquiescence. He glanced over at the contents of the charmed cauldron.

"Am I going to have to separate you and Miss Griffiths as well, Potter? This distraction seems to be interfering with you work. " He pointed his wand over Harry's cauldron. "And I thought your brews could get no worse. *Evanesco!*"

For a moment, Harry felt a surge of triumph, feeling certain that Padma's charm would protect his potion from Snape's temper, but as the spell hit the cauldron, it *rebounded* back towards its source, and Harry's triumph faded.

Snape stumbled backwards a few steps. His hands flew to his face where the spell had struck, and Harry could do nothing but stare in mute horror as Snape slowly moved his fingers away to reveal that his nose had vanished.

For a moment, Snape fumbled almost comically, his fingers pawing the air where his large, hooked nose ought to have been. But it simply wasn't. Harry wrenched his eyes away from the sight long enough to glance over at Padma, who had her hands clapped over her mouth, her eyes as big as crystal balls.

"Wha..." Snape gasped. He had gone cross-eyed trying to look down at his own face, but not one of the students even so much as thought of laughing. Snape pointed his wand at his face and tried to speak the counter spell.

"Ocsenabe!" he said. Nothing happened. Harry's stomach dropped down around his feet. Snape couldn't pronounce the spell correctly because his nose was missing. Abruptly Snape looked up and his dark eyes focused on Harry. "YOU!" he roared in an oddly nasal voice, taking a step towards Harry. Harry braced himself, not sure whether to expect a physical or verbal attack.

"It was my idea!" Justin shouted suddenly, standing up from his seat behind Harry so fast that he knocked his stool to the ground. Snape paused in mid stride to stare at him

Harry whirled around. *SHUT UP!* he mouthed, but Justin wasn't looking at him. Harry wanted to beat him about the head with his wand; the stupid twat wasn't going to make anything better by trying to martyr himself.

Snape glared menacingly at Justin, who cowed slightly under the furious gaze. His black eyes shifted back to Harry.

"It was my spell!" Padma shouted suddenly, as she, too, leaped out of her seat. Harry gaped at her and tried to shake his head. Her dark eyes were darting back and forth between Harry and Snape. "I cast the spell. It was my mistake. Don't punish Harry!"

"We all helped," Gwyn said suddenly. Harry couldn't believe what he was hearing. He buried his head in his hands in disbelief; they were going to be massacred, and Snape would probably make him watch the others go first.

"It isn't right, the way you've been giving Harry all those zeros for his potions," Gwyn continued, seemingly unaffected by the deadly look Snape now trained on her. "But Harry didn't want us to go to the headmaster about it. He works hard for you and you won't even give him a fair chance, so we thought we'd even the odds." She was now matching Snape glare for glare. "We didn't know your spell would reflect back on you," she added as an afterthought. "That part was an accident."

Snape was livid. His normally pallid complexion invented new shades of crimson with his mounting rage. Fortunately, he also seemed to be, for once, at a complete loss for words. He raked his deadly glare over each of them in turn, but the others didn't seem to be willing to back down.

Harry wished they would. His stomach was writhing guiltily as though he'd swallowed an entire bucket of slugs.

"Dedentions!" Snape shouted. "All ob you!" He turned on his heel and stormed out of the classroom, leaving his students in stunned silence.

"Why did you do it?" Harry protested as they made their way up to the Great Hall. "I wouldn't have grassed on you. You were safe!"

Justin shrugged. "I dunno," he said, sounding a little forlorn. "I just didn't think it was right, you taking the blame, when it was my idea."

"It could have been much worse," Hermione said, trying to console Padma, who had gone as white as a ghost. "Detention's not so bad."

"But I've never had a detention before," she whimpered quietly. "Even Parvati's never had detention before! I'm a prefect! What are Mum and Dad going to say?"

"I'm sorry," Harry said glumly.

Padma swallowed hard and shook her head. "No, don't be. It's my own fault. If I hadn't botched up the spell--"

"If you hadn't opened your mouth you mean!" Harry said, exasperated. "Snape never would have known it was you. You shouldn't have got yourself in trouble."

"Oh give it a rest, Harry," Gwyn said, patting him on the shoulder. "We all know you're very brave and noble and would have taken the rap for us, but it wasn't right and you know it. Somebody needed to stand up to him."

"It didn't need to be you!" Harry retorted. "*We all helped.* What was that about?"

"Hey, I helped!" Gwyn said, indignantly. "I held the cauldron, didn't I?" She smiled slyly. "Besides, the look on his face was worth every minute I spend in detention."

Justin snorted. "It *was* rather an improvement, losing the nose and all," he chuckled. Hermione looked vaguely appalled.

"Yeah well..." Harry said, still feeling discomfited by the whole thing.

"Look," Gwyn said, taking his arm to hold him back and waving the others on, "think of it this way: you've stood up for me twice now, and I just wanted a chance to stand up for you." She reached down and interlaced her fingers with his.

"That explains why you decided to play the scapegoat, but what about those other two?" Harry grumbled halfheartedly.

"They're your friends, Harry. You'd have done the same for any of them, and they know it." She smiled at him. "They *like* you, Harry. I realize that's a difficult concept..."

He smiled at last; it was terribly difficult to hang on to a bad mood when Gwyn was smiling at him and holding his hand. "What about you, then?" he asked quietly.

"I like you too," she said, matter-of-factly, "though I thought that would have been obvious by now."

Harry shrugged, pretending to pout. "I like to be reminded."

Gwyn stood up on her tiptoes and planted a quick kiss on his lips. "How's that for a reminder?"

"So it's true, then."

Harry glanced up. Malfoy was standing across the Entrance Hall, staring at them. His wand was gripped tightly in his hand, feet planted wide apart, his black leather schoolbag and potions supplies forgotten at his feet. He was staring at Gwyn, who whirled around to face him.

"You're actually *dating* the scar-head," he said in a low icy voice. Harry was struck by how much Malfoy resembled his father, and he squeezed Gwyn's hand possessively. Malfoy snorted derisively. "And to think, you could have had me..."

Gwyn laughed haughtily. "You were never even in the running, Draco."

Malfoy's face was colorless and frighteningly blank. Harry couldn't help but feel that this was a bad sign. Slowly, he began to reach for his wand.

"Don't even think about it," Malfoy hissed. "She's dead before you draw, Potter." Harry froze, but his mind was racing. Surely Malfoy wouldn't be fool enough to try an unforgivable curse only a few steps from a Great Hall filled with people...

Anxiously, Harry glanced around the hall, scanning for a professor. Several small groups of students had gathered around the edges of the entrance hall, watching, unwilling to pass between Malfoy and his prey.

"Gawd, you're so full of it!" Gwyn said loudly. "You talk like such a big man, Draco, but really you're just a scared little boy." Harry stifled an urge to clamp his hand down over her mouth. Gwyn released his hand and took a step towards Malfoy.

"Do you want to know why I like Harry and I don't like you? Is that what this is about? Well I'll tell you. Harry is *nice* to me. He doesn't act like I'm some kind of trained poodle to be put on display. He doesn't treat me like an object, or a second class citizen. He *respects* me -- and that's something I doubt you can even comprehend."

She took another step towards Malfoy. Harry slowly started reaching for his wand again. Malfoy's eyes darted over to him, and Harry's eyes widened as he saw Malfoy's knuckles go white around his wand. Harry froze again. Gwyn either didn't notice, or didn't care.

"So you can just cut the crap with this big macho act you're putting on here. No one buys it. Least of all me." She was standing only a few paces away from him now, her hands on her hips, obviously daring him to try something. Malfoy's eyes were narrowed, but his face remained eerily calm.

"Mr. Potter!" a stern voice called, and Harry jumped as Professor McGonagall strode into the Entrance Hall. Malfoy dropped his wand, and Gwyn gave him a withering look as she walked back over to rejoin Harry. Professor McGonagall didn't spare a moment for either of them, her sharp eyes trained all the time on Harry.

"Professor Snape has just asked that I take care of your detentions for him, as he is in the Hospital Wing, recovering. I will expect you in my office at eight o'clock tonight."

Harry blanched. "But we've got Quidditch practice tonight, Professor! The match is only two days away!"

Professor McGonagall's glare hardened and she pressed her lips together tightly. "Perhaps you should have considered the consequences of your actions more thoroughly, Mr. Potter," she said in a tone of iciest disapproval. She glanced over at Gwyn.

"I would suggest you seek out Professor Flitwick, Miss Griffiths. No doubt he will want you to begin your detentions as soon as possible as well." With one last look at Harry, she turned and swept into the Great Hall. Harry glanced around quickly for Malfoy, but he had disappeared into the crowd.

"I'd better go tell Ron I've got detention," he said grimly as they followed Professor McGonagall into the Hall.

Gwyn looked confused.

"Well who else am I going to ask to lead Quidditch practice? He's practically Captain already anyway... I might as well abdicate now." Harry sighed.

"You don't mean that," Gwyn chided. They entered the Hall and Harry spotted Ron, already dressed in his practice robes, showing the other members of the Gryffindor team a play board he had drawn up.

"Don't I?"

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE: Owl Post

Harry! F&G sent me some new fireworks! For Bonfire Night! Where should we set them off?!

Dunno. Maybe the Astronomy Tower? Wait. NEW fireworks? Have they been tested?

Mostly.

What do you mean mostly?? They either have been or they haven't!

OK, so they haven't! But that's why they sent them to us! It's all in the letter!

What letter?

Dear Ron,

Hope you had an eventful Halloween without us! Business is booming, but our customer base is easily bored and constantly demanding new products. Luckily, your ingenious brothers are well up to the task. Hence, we present you with our newest selection of fireworks -- for personal use ONLY! We wanted to have them ready for Bonfire Night, but we haven't had a truly proper test run yet. Need lots of wide open space for these, and setting them off in Diagon Alley seemed unwise; excellent publicity, yes, but our current budget doesn't allow for hefty ministry fines. Thought about doing it at the Burrow, but Mum would have our heads, like as not. Thus, you are elected, you lucky sod!

We will not spoil the surprise by telling you what each one is, but please be sure to note any unusual side effects. (We don't want another flying pigs incident, now do we?) (Actually, we tried to recreate that. You have no idea how painful it is trying to convince fireworks to mate. Used up a whole crate of catherine wheels and we never could make it work.) We are accepting advance orders if any of the sprogs seem interested. And believe us, they will be.

Your amazingly fantastic older brothers,

F & G

P.S. For love of the giant squid, surprise us and DON'T GET CAUGHT!

I'm not sure that explains much of anything. What side effects?

Oh. You know. Just stuff like last time.

Stop passing notes! McGonagall's not blind, you know.

Why do you think I'm passing notes?

Because your quills are moving an inordinate amount, and I know you're not actually taking notes.

That is what brilliant studious friends like you are for.

She's the only person I know who uses big words even when she's passing notes!

I like that! Where would you be if I decided not to let you borrow my notes any longer?

On our knees begging?

Haha.

7th November, 1996

H,

Lithuania is dull. Very dull, though the lakes are nice. Rather wet. I understand now, why Lithuania did not make the Prophet's Top Ten Wizarding Destinations Worldwide; or the top hundred, for that matter. The next time a certain Professor offers to send you to Lithuania, just say, "No."

Thank you, incidentally, for asking me to stay to dinner on Halloween. Hope I didn't embarrass you too much.

Having nothing better to do in this bastion of adventure, this village where the latest gossip is that someone's cow gave birth to her calf, I thought I would write you a letter. Writing is more involved than speaking to you the other way, and thus, uses up more of my time – no great loss, I assure you. I am eagerly awaiting the results of the Gryffindor v. Slytherin match, as I have very little to do at the moment aside from contemplating your inevitable victory; the people I was telling you about have decided not to meet again for another two weeks. Please let me know the results of the match as soon as possible, and tell Neville to cheer twice as loudly for you all on my behalf.

If there is anything else you want to talk about, you know how to reach me.

Have I mentioned how dull it is here? I believe the men outside are actually watching the grass grow; this is even more distressing than it first appears, as it is most certainly winter here. Wonder if they will sit there 'til spring... Lunch in Lithuania makes a lonely supper at the townhouse seem hugely entertaining. Well, I shan't tire your eyes with any more of my grumbling; I'm off to find a library that contains books in English before I go stark raving sane.

Hoping you're well,
Remus

P.S. Up Gryffindor!

Dear Remus,

Thanks for the letter. I tried to talk to you the other way, but I couldn't get through, so I thought I would give you something to read in case you couldn't find a library. We won the match, but only just. It was all foggy and we couldn't hardly see the pitch for the clouds. We were doing brilliantly at the start, and scored the first three goals. Then Jack Sloper let one of the Bludgers get away from him and Goyle got a chance to knock it at Ginny, which set Ron off something awful. Then, while he was busy telling Jack off, Slytherin scored. After that, Ron kind of lost his nerve, and he let in two more goals before I could catch the Snitch. It was close though. Good thing Malfoy is a rubbish Seeker. I think the team was a bit hard on Ron. Nobody wanted to talk to him much after the game, and he got kind of annoyed and went off on one about how he wasn't going to help us all out any more. Then Ginny said, "Good," and he was really quiet for the rest of the day. He had three Butterbeers from the stash he bought in Hogsmeade. It wasn't a good night. Not much else to tell. We set off some of Fred and George's new fireworks for Bonfire Night, but it was a bit of a let down. Half of them didn't go off and the other half just managed to fizzle or set the Astronomy Tower on fire. Don't worry, Hermione knows loads of good firefighting spells. She said she looked them up back in the second year when she realized that Hogwarts doesn't have a fire brigade. What a little swot.

Harry

11th November, 1996

H,

Thank you very much for the action replay. Sorry you weren't able to reach me. Seems our ingenious little devices aren't entirely reliable over large distances. I tried to contact you as well, and I found myself looking out of a mirror into some strange witch's bedroom. She was singing to her cat. I left her to it before any permanent damage was done – to my ears.

I imagine it's a bit hard on Ron to be on a team with his best friend and his little sister. Sirius and your dad had a huge row the first year that Sirius was on the Quidditch team because he thought James was trying to tell him how to be a Beater. James, as always, thought he was helping. It came out all right in the end, as I'm sure it will with Ron and the rest of the team.

You lot are very lucky that Filch didn't catch you setting fire to things! He has a particular mistrust of anything to do with fire and likely would have strung you up in the dungeons by your toes. Also, if Hermione is a swot, then I suppose I am as well; I looked those spells up for the same reason, but I found a great many other uses for them, living with Sirius and your father.

The group I've been telling you about decided to surprise me with a little impromptu gathering last night. It wasn't a very pleasant soiree, but I suppose it was all for the best, as they have decided to let me join their club. Apparently, they consider my isochronal malediction (look it up) an advantage. I am expecting to learn more about club activities and dues in the coming weeks, and then, one can only hope I will return to England, as the club meets on a rather infrequent basis.

Unfortunately, or rather, fortunately, as I was very glad to receive it, your letter did serve in lieu of a library; I never managed to find one. I'd very much like to hear from you again if you have the opportunity to write. As always, be careful what you say, and don't sign your name. Also, it's probably best that you don't send Hedwig again; such a stunning creature is likely to attract the wrong sort of attention. Do give her my regrets, though, that she won't be able to return to help rid my rooms of a few more mice.

Most sincerely,

Remus

Dear Harry,

Detention sucks! Flitwick made us clean up after his third years today. I think they were learning Engorging charms or something. There were bits of exploded I-don't-want-to-know-what all over the classroom. YUCK! Watching Padma scrape desks was kind of funny though. She can be a little stuck up sometimes, you know? Too bad you have to do your detentions all alone. Is McGonagall making you grade first year essays for her still? What a drag!

Are we back on for studying with Padma and Justin once these endless detentions are over? Padma really doesn't blame you for the detentions, you know, she just likes to complain, I think. But don't worry, she still likes you. And so do I! What is it with you and Ravenclaw women?

X's and O's,

Gwyn

Dear Remus,

Ha-ha. Good one. Even Hermione didn't know what "isochronal" meant. I'm finally done with the detentions Snape Professor Snape gave me for vanishing his nose. What do you mean "dues?" Everybody's talking to Ron again, but he's still being very cheeky about letting us know that he's not helping us with practises any more. The only other big thing that happened is that Ron told Fred and George that Dean was cheating on Ginny. Well, he says he didn't, but I can't see how else they found out since Ginny didn't tell them. Anyway, yesterday morning, Dean got an anonymous Howler that screamed at him for being a cheater and a rogue and a charlatan and all kinds of things. It sounded an awful lot like Fred trying to make his voice go deeper. And of course, since it was from the twins, they couldn't just send a regular old Howler, so they fiddled about with it somehow, and instead of burning up like a normal one, it followed Dean around all morning shouting at him and making rude noises and calling him dirty names until Professor McGonagall got angry and blew it up. I'm sending you some clippings from the Prophet. I didn't know if you were getting it out there in dullsville. I lost the chocolate I bought at Honeydukes, but Ron seems to have bough enough Chocolate Frogs to feed the entire school. Have you got one of my cards yet?

Ron and Hermione say hello. Neville says to tell you that he did his best cheering for us. And Ginny wants to know what sort of hex would be most appropriate for discouraging meddlesome brothers.

H

P.S. Ron says not to tell Ginny anything because she's already better at hexes than most seventh years and it would be giving her an unfair advantage.

Amelia Bones Found Dead

The body of Amelia Bones, head of Magical Law Enforcement, was found in her home in Islington yesterday, confirming widespread suspicions of foul play surrounding her disappearance. Ms. Bones' family reported her missing late last August and she had not been seen or heard from since.

The body was found by her sister-in-law, who was checking on the empty house. Aurors made a thorough search of the home at the time of her disappearance; thus either Ms. Bones returned to her home of her own volition, or she was returned there posthumously. The Aurors' report states that there was no evidence of physical trauma apparent on the body. Further investigations have begun to determine the cause of death and Ms. Bones' whereabouts for the past twelve weeks.

While there is no official word on any possible connection between Ms. Bones' death and the recent upsurge in Death Eater activity, rumors have long been circulating that her disappearance was related to several inflammatory comments she made regarding Minister Fudge's pardon of Lucius Malfoy and others in connection with You-Know-Who's reappearance at the ministry in June. Many believed that Bones' public denunciation of Mr. Malfoy and his associates might have led to her disappearance and now, her apparent murder.

The Ministry had no comment when asked to speculate on the cause or circumstances regarding Ms. Bones' demise.

Dementors Spotted Near Hogsmeade

Two Dementors were seen on the night of 10th November only half a mile from the town center of Hogsmeade. Several residents Flooed the Ministry at around 20:30 on the night in question to report seeing the hooded creatures or sensing their presence.

"It were like the whole world had gone all frozen," one of the witnesses, Eloise O'Riley, told *Prophet* reporters, "an' I heard my brother callin' me from across the moors. Only he's been dead these fifteen years. Led away by a hinkypunk." Other witnesses shared similar stories, confirming that the Dementors had indeed been close enough to cause residents to feel the effects of their presence.

Newly appointed Ministry Press-Witch, Miss Dymphna Lefou, had no comment on the incident when asked during a conference yesterday. The official Ministry position remains that the Dementors were permitted to leave Azkaban and that they pose no threat to the general public. Local rumour, however, attributes several suspicious deaths and disappearances to the Dementors, including the loss of a seven-year-old Muggle boy in Kent to "wasting sickness."

Public outrage is reaching a fevered pitch as residents of Hogsmeade demand to know what is being done to protect their town from the roving Dementors. Miss Lefou did acknowledge that the Ministry has been fielding a record number of Howlers and angry Floos over the incident.

15 November

Dear H.,

Thanks for the articles. I hadn't heard about Amelia. She was a great witch, and the Ministry will certainly feel her loss. Her brother was with our group the first time around. As for the Dementors, just be alert when you're out on the grounds. I advocate carrying chocolate with you at all times; but I advocate chocolate whether there are Dementors threatening or not. Fudge must be worried about his image if he's appointed a press liaison.

Dare I ask how, or why, you vanished Professor Snape's nose? It seems a rather foolhardy thing to do, though I imagine you had your reasons. How many detentions did he give you? Did he get his nose back, or is it gone forever? You can stop smiling now; it's not as funny as all that.

Please tell Ginny that there is no hex I know of strong enough to dissuade overprotective older brothers. My sympathies go out to Dean ---- though I can't imagine what else he expected, being unfaithful to a girl with older brothers like Fred and George. I wonder if they'll find a market for their improved Howlers? And to answer your question, I have not seen your card yet. Do you have an extra you could send?

Nothing much new here in "dullsville." The dues you asked about aren't fit for discussion here. Eventually, I am expected to contribute to the cause. The professor had an idea that we thought might postpone the inevitable, but it seems as though the inevitable may come before I gather the information we need from them. I may pay you another visit when I get back to England in order to work that out, though when that might be I still can't say.

By the way, paragraphs are your friend. Don't be afraid to use them.

Yours truly,

Remus

Harry, what's wrong with Ron?

What do you mean?

He's not even trying to make an illusion of a moth for Professor Flitwick.

Neither are you.

Yes, but I've already finished. What's wrong with him?

How should I know?

You are his best friend, aren't you?

That doesn't seem to mean much these days.

He thinks we should be having more Quidditch practices and I said I didn't have time.

Why does he think you need more practices? You don't have another match until February, do you?

My point exactly!!

Hmm...

What Hmm? You're wearing your "boys are stupid" face.

I am not! I was just thinking that maybe something is bothering him. Other than Quidditch, I mean.

Well that's lovely. Very enlightening.

Why don't you ask him what's bothering him?

Every time he opens his bloody mouth all that comes out is Quidditch! You can talk to him if you want. I'm done with the prick until he learns to talk about something else.

Don't swear. It's vulgar.

What are you doing for Christmas holidays?

Going home I expect. Why?

Dunno. Thought you might be going to the Burrow or GP.

I think my parents want me to come home. Are you going to the Burrow?

Not if Ron's still being a prat! I'd rather stay here.

You don't mean that.

Dear Remus,

Ron is a git. He thinks we should be having two or three more Quidditch practices every week, even though it's been bloody pouring for ages (we're expecting Hagrid to start building an ark any day now.) And our next match isn't until next year!

I've been very busy lately, even not counting Quidditch. The Professors are completely mad. They seem to think that we're going to be gone for months and months instead of just a few weeks and are assigning homework accordingly.

Are you going to be back to England in time for Christmas hols?

I didn't vanish Professor Snape's nose on purpose. Padma helped me put an impervious charm on my cauldron so he couldn't vanish my potions and it sort of backfired. You can stop smiling; it isn't that funny. I got five nights detention even though it wasn't really my fault.

I am enclosing one of my Chocolate Frog cards for you.

We have been having DA meetings all the time too. Neville and Luna have been teaching the new members and they're getting pretty good. I've started the rest on hexes and jinxes. Ginny demonstrated the Bat-Bogey hex on Lavender (she says she's over Dean, but I wonder).

Ron hit me from behind with Reboris jinx and I was all sweaty and red for three hours. He says it was an accident -- I doubt it! The git.

Professor Lindell is also mental. She expects me to practice my Occlumency and Legilimency for two hours every day! How exactly am I meant to practice Legilimency by myself? Does she want me to read my own mind?

If you're not back by Christmas, can I stay at GP by myself?

Gotta go. Ron's just come in.

H.

P.S. Do you know Professor Lindell?

Dear Harry,

I can't meet you tonight. I've got TONS of homework to do and Padma's making me help her study for that Charms exam. She acts like I'm this great charms genius when really, it's just stuff we did ahead of you guys. Ugh.

How about tomorrow night? Where shall we go? I know Cho's boyfriend takes her up to the Astronomy Tower...

Write me back when you stop blushing.

Gwyn

Harry --

I'm not going to be able to make it tonight. Someone stole my Potions notes out of my bag (three guesses who) so I'm having to copy Padma's and it took me two hours to persuade her to let me look at them, so I've got to do them now while I've got the chance. And you thought Hermione was a tightass -- Gawd!

SORRY! (

Gwyn

20 November

H.,

Sorry to have taken so long in replying, but things are in motion here. I had no idea this club was so active, but I have since learned that they are pursuing several dubious lines of research, and I have been called upon as a new member to give opinions et cetera. They have also offered several suggestions as to how I might spend my time this coming weekend. I'm pleased to say, I declined all of their offers; some were rather disturbing to say the least.

Have you spoken to Ron about what might be bothering him? Perhaps it's more than Quidditch mania. When Sirius and your dad fell out that time, it turned out that James was busy "helping" Sirius all the time because he was really afraid that Sirius would show him up or somehow take his place with the team. It was silly, of course, but that's just how he was feeling. Do you think Ron might be feeling the same?

I can't say yet whether or not I'll be back in time for Christmas, but I don't think anyone would be keen on the idea of you staying in the house by yourself for the whole of the holidays. Besides, it really isn't my decision; I'm certain some sort of arrangements are already being made for you, though. Molly would never let you be alone for Christmas.

I don't believe I have ever met your Professor Lindell. Am I right in thinking that someone told me she used to be a Scriptionist? If so, what on earth is she doing teaching schoolchildren Defence Against the Dark Arts? Not that it isn't a valuable occupation of course, but Scriptionists are in high demand. Come to think of it, I did know a girl named Lindell in school, but she died a long time ago.

Thank you for the Chocolate Frog card, but you should have signed it for me. Do try to talk to Ron. I'm sure it's all a misunderstanding, but if all else fails, Viritus Puya, the Greenbum hex, is a good counterattack to the Reboris

Yours,

Remus

Hi Harry,

So, listen to this. I saw Draco lurking around outside my Muggle Studies class again today. I KNOW he doesn't take Muggle Studies, and there aren't any other classrooms over that way. WEIRDNESS! Justin got all big brotherly when I mentioned it to him and he said he would walk me to class from now on. Ha! He's as bad as you are.

Here's that book you wanted to borrow. It's really good. Very creepy ending. You should eat it up.

Luv,

Gwyn

15 September

Dearest Gwendolyn,

I worry that my actions yesterday might have seemed too forward. I realize that you are a lady of sophistication and taste, and I would not want you to think of me as a common boor. I am just so overcome by your beauty whenever you are near me, that I take leave of my senses and do foolish things.

Allow me the chance to make it up to you. I cannot believe that our meeting this summer was purely by chance; the daughter of an important American politician and the heir of the most respected wizard house in Britain do not meet by chance, dance as we danced, and say it was nothing.

Your devoted admirer,

Draco Malfoy

Remus,

What's this weekend?

It isn't that I was worried about being alone for Christmas. I think I'd probably prefer it. Or maybe just with you and Buckbeak.

If Ron's got a problem, he should talk to me about it. Despite what Professor Lindell might think, I am not a mind reader. Never mind about this weekend. Professor Lindell's got a big calendar kind of thing painted on her wall, and I checked it when I was there for my lesson just a bit ago. She says I'm not practicing my Legilimency, and I told her that I didn't know how to and she got shitty/shirty with me. Sometimes she's cool and sometimes she's not. At the moment I am worried because Malfoy won't leave Gwyn alone. I found this sleazy note he wrote her stuck in a book she lent to me. She told me he gave it to her ages ago. She also told me that she thinks he's following her. I told her not to go anywhere alone, but she doesn't seem to think it's a big deal. She keeps calling him her "stalker" and laughing about it and accusing me of wanting to follow her to the loo. But she doesn't know him like I do.

H.

Dear Remus,

How are you? It's been a couple of days, and I hadn't had a letter back from you yet. So I thought maybe my last one went astray somehow, which is OK because it was mostly just waffle.

Please write soon.

H.

Dear Remus,

Are you OK? I thought my first letter might not have reached you so I sent another, but they couldn't both have got lost, could they? I hope you're OK.

Please write soon!

H.

Dear Remus,

If you don't write back to me in the next two days, I am telling Dumbledore. If you're angry with me, that's OK, just write "I'm OK." on the back of this note and send it back and I won't bother you any more.

H.

27 November

Dear Harry,

I'm sorry I didn't write to you sooner, but I am OK and I am definitely not angry with you. Why on earth would I be angry with you? This month was difficult because I didn't have my potion from Professor Snape. I was a lot more ill than I have been in a while, which is why I couldn't write. I didn't mean to worry you. I would never knowingly do that.

I am still very tired, so I will keep this short. The club is changing headquarters. They do that every few weeks, I have found out. As soon as I am able, I will be going with them. I will try to be home for Christmas. I will write again when I am settled.

Please don't worry about me. I am tougher than I look.

Your friend,

Remus

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO: Visions

It was dark but for a blue-white light softly glowing around the edges of the rooms, making everything look silvery and ghost-like. Harry walked softly from the foyer at Grimmauld Place and ascended the dark staircase. The candles were lit in their sconces, but they, too, gave off an eerie silvery light rather than their normal, warm glow.

As he reached the top of the stairs, he turned abruptly, and headed for the room he shared with Ron on the second floor. The door swung open easily and silently at his touch, but Harry paused as he realized someone was already in the room.

The figure had his back to Harry and was kneeling by one of the four-poster beds, hunched over a bundle lying on top of the duvet. He gave off a different quality of light than the rest of the room had done, warmer and more golden. He was wearing dark, midnight blue robes over denims and black leather boots, and his thick black hair hung down past his shoulders, fringe obscuring his face. He leaned forward and a strange sound rent the silence.

"Pbbbbbthhhhhh!"

The figure straightened, and Harry realized with a shock that it was Sirius, though not Sirius as Harry had ever known him. He was young, his face smooth and free of the deep lines and hollows that twelve years of pain had wrought; his eyes sparkled and his lips quirked upwards at the edges in a quintessentially Sirius smile.

"That's right, you little bugger!! I'm gonna get you!"

Harry moved quickly into the room, opening his mouth to speak, but as he approached, he saw what was in the bundle on the bed, and the words froze, half formed, in his mouth.

Lying atop the coverlet, squirming and wriggling, was the object of Sirius' attention. It was a baby boy, dressed in a pale green tee shirt several sizes too large, with a cartoon broomstick embroidered on the front. The infant was maybe two or three months old, with enormous green eyes that followed Sirius' every movement and an absurd quantity of dark messy hair.

"Oh you want more, do ya?" Sirius teased. He raised the baby's shirt, bent over and blew another enormous raspberry on the boy's stomach. The baby opened his mouth in a huge toothless smile and then made an odd, uncertain sort of sound. Sirius sat up at once and studied him, cocking his head to one side. Harry could almost picture Snuffles' big black ears perking up.

"What was that?" he said curiously, bending towards the baby once again. The little boy squealed delightedly, grasping a lock of Sirius' long hair in his tiny fist, and then gurgled again in what was very clearly an attempt to laugh.

"Well bugger me," Sirius whispered, studying the child. He bent forward and blew another wet raspberry on the soft infant tummy. The baby opened his mouth wide, green eyes shining.

Then laughter exploded from the little boy's mouth like a golden bubble. Sirius and Harry both watched it, transfixed, as it rose several feet into the air and hovered.

"James!" Sirius shouted. "Lily! Come qui--"

The golden bubble burst suddenly, and became a thousand tiny specks of light which danced apart and flew all about the room. The infant watched them with delight and continued to laugh. One of the specks flew right up to Harry; it was the tiniest person he'd ever seen.

"He laughed!" Sirius cried, an impish grin breaking across his face as the last of the golden specks disappeared into the cracks and shadows of the room. "I made Harry laugh!" He was staring across the room, and Harry followed his gaze eagerly, hoping for a glimpse of his mum and dad. The room was empty. Sirius' face suddenly became mock sober.

"Well that's because, Prongs old man, I am *funny*. I am the epitome of hilarity and mirth. You, on the other hand, have become a Responsible Father who is unfunny in every conceivable way -- not a single funny bone in your completely humorless body. You are a twit sans wit, a bloody-- oops!" He glanced a few feet to the left, his expression contrite. Then he grinned.

"Eh, he can't understand a word I'm saying anyway, can you, yeh little nipper?" He turned back to the infant Harry and started tickling him again.

"Yeah, yeah. We're fine," he said dismissively, obviously still talking to the invisible Lily and James. Harry's heart was beginning to beat rather painfully. "I think I can look after my own godson for ten minutes' time!"

James must have made some sort of sarcastic remark because Sirius threw a rather black look over his shoulder before scooping the baby up into his arms. He lay back across the bed, feet dangling towards the floor and placed the infant Harry on his stomach. The baby raised himself up slightly on his arms to watch Sirius and laughed again.

"That's right, mate," Sirius chortled, one large hand covering the baby's tiny back. "You'll always have your uncle Sirius to laugh at." Without warning, Sirius glanced over and looked the older Harry directly in the eye.

With a jolt, Harry woke up.

A stream of white light was pouring through a gap in the curtains around his bed. He stared at it for a moment, watching motes of dust dancing in the light like the tiny specks of laughter from his dream. Suddenly, however, it occurred to him that there was far too much light. He squinted at it for a moment before sitting bolt upright and throwing open the curtains. The sun was blazing through the dormitory window. He had overslept.

"Bollocks!" he shouted. Ron snorted loudly and groaned; the rest of the sixth year boys were already dressed and gone. In a panic of lateness, Harry threw on his clothes haphazardly, grabbed his satchel and raced out of the room. It was Friday, his sleepy brain managed to tell him, and he was late for his Occlumency lesson.

Harry raced down the stairs and through the corridors until he arrived, panting, at Professor Lindell's office door. He raised his fist to knock, but the door swung away from him. Professor Lindell stood in the doorway looking cross.

"You're late, Mr. Potter," she said, peering at him over the tops of her oval glasses. Harry mumbled a breathless apology as he moved past her into the office.

"Have you been practicing?" she asked, moving around behind her battered and ancient wooden desk.

"Mmm hmm..." Harry said, averting his eyes as he dug through his satchel, well aware of the irony of trying to lie to his Legilimency teacher.

"Well, let's see about that," she said briskly, clearing a few rolls of parchment off of her desk. "We'll start with Legilimency, whenever you're ready."

Harry nodded and drew his wand. Professor Lindell had taught him the incantation and the wand movement, but, as she had so often told them in her Defence lectures, it was the intent which really put the power behind the Legilimency spell. Harry's intent, it seemed, was not quite powerful enough. At first, he had not been able to make anything happen at all; Professor Lindell's natural tendency, as a trained Occlumens, to block her mind made basic Legilimency very difficult. Eventually, however, he had learned ways to wiggle around the mental barriers she retained even when she was trying to relax. He had, so far, only succeeded in seeing a few flashes of random memory before she forced him out again. It was an exhausting process.

Harry took a deep breath as he pointed his wand at Professor Lindell's head and concentrated on a small mole between her eyebrows. "*Legilimens!*" he said firmly. At first, as before, nothing happened, but slowly he began to feel out the cracks he knew were there. It was a very strange sensation, almost like peeling a hard boiled egg.

And then he was in. It usually happened like that, in all of an instant. Images were flashing at him randomly, and he knew he had only a few moments before Professor Lindell would push him out, so he began to concentrate on the memories he had weeks ago decided to seek out.

An old house. Someone pouring tea. A high heeled shoe. A laughing face. A flash of red hair in a crowd of kids. Harry pressed. A girl with long red hair and sparkling green eyes sitting at a table with other girls and laughing about-- Nothing.

Harry opened his eyes. Professor Lindell was watching him from across the desk.

"That was... better," she said slowly. She rubbed her index finger across the bridge of her nose and sighed.

"I know what you're looking for," she said in a different tone.

Harry opened his mouth and then closed it again. "What do you mean?" he managed at last. She regarded him with those cold grey-blue eyes of hers.

"I know what you're looking for, Mr. Potter," she repeated, "but I'm afraid I haven't much to give. I didn't know her that well."

Harry dropped his eyes to his lap and studied the back of his right hand, wrapped around his wand. He watched the tendons under his skin as he flexed and released.

"I didn't know her at all," he said softly. He glanced up and caught her studying him. "I'm sorry," he said in a firmer voice. "It's just, I've learned a lot about my dad from Re-- Professor Lupin and... and other people, but I still don't know much about her. I just wanted to..."

"That's all right," Professor Lindell replied. "Remus Lupin was very good friends with your parents, wasn't he? I suppose he would have sought you out while he was teaching here." Harry didn't

reply. "I have all his notes," she continued absently. "He certainly seems to have been the most competent of your string of Defense teachers." She paused for a moment. "Do you know why he left?"

"He..." Harry began. "Health problems," he said quickly, hoping that Professor Lindell would not ask him to elaborate. She didn't. "Did you, er... know each other? At school, I mean?"

Professor Lindell raised an eyebrow at him. "I knew of him," she replied. "Actually, everyone knew of him because he ran round with James Potter and his crowd, and everyone knew them," she said thoughtfully. "He was a prefect, and he was friends with Lily, who was friends with my sister, Penny. But I wasn't particularly friendly with any of them. I was much younger."

Harry nodded, not sure what to say.

"Are you ready to continue?" she asked him, drawing her own wand. Harry braced himself. "*Legilimens.*"

Harry pictured the Centre in his mind and a very tight ball of clouds at its center. He was getting much better at Occlumency now that he didn't have to worry about what he might be forced to see. He and Professor Lindell had come to a sort of agreement after the unfortunate post-Snape lesson, that they would keep confidential whatever one of them might see of the other's mind.

Suddenly, Harry had the peeling egg sensation again, only he felt it from the inside, and memories were flickering through his mind. Remus was handing him a piece of chocolate on the train. Remus was helping him up off the floor after a particularly nasty session with the boggart. Remus was drinking tea in the kitchen at Grimmauld Place. Remus was standing out on the grounds, near the willow, and he was--

"NO!" Harry shouted out loud. He felt a sharp pain in his knee and in his head at the same time. Everything was dark. It took him a moment to realize that was because he had his eyes closed.

"Mr. Potter!"

When he opened them, he was kneeling on the floor. Apparently, he'd fallen out of his chair and hit his head on the desk on the way down.

"Ow," he muttered, a bit belatedly.

"Are you all right?" Professor Lindell grabbed his arm and helped him back into his chair.

"I think so," he said softly. He hadn't reacted that strongly to Legilimency in a long time -- not since last year, actually. It had been the memory, he realized. He hadn't wanted Lindell to see the night he'd watched Remus change.

Professor Lindell sunk down into the other leather wingback and stared at him avidly. Her glasses were slightly askew and her hair was coming down in wisps around her face.

"Did I hex you?" he asked, rubbing his head.

"Don't worry about that," she said briskly, which obviously meant that he had. He frowned at her, and she arched an eyebrow at him. "You missed."

"Sorry," Harry groaned. "I get a little carried away sometimes."

The corners of Professor Lindell's mouth twitched. "No wonder Professor Snape didn't want to teach you any more."

Harry huffed. "Shall we go again?" he asked, sitting up straighter.

Professor Lindell held a hand up. "Just rest for a minute," she said, standing. She went around behind her desk and began gathering together things to make tea. "Was that Professor Lupin?" she asked absently as she started the kettle boiling with her wand. Harry nodded when she glanced sideways at him.

"I imagine he was on both our minds because we were talking about him," she said, passing Harry a plain white china teacup. He accepted it, took a sip, and thought briefly that Remus would probably like Professor Lindell, if only for her taste in tea. "You and he know one another outside of school, don't you?" she asked.

"We're friends," Harry said impulsively. She glanced at him again. He knew it sounded rather odd that a man in his thirties should be friends with a sixteen year old boy, but Professor Lindell was good at not judging things. Or, if she did, she was good at not saying anything about it.

"What's that you've got there?" Professor Lindell asked him suddenly, gesturing to his shirt. Harry looked down; his school tie was loose about his neck and he hadn't done up the top button of his shirt. Somehow, perhaps when he'd fallen, his amulet had fallen out and now hung framed against the red and gold of his tie. He ran his finger over the raised markings on it.

"Family heirloom," he mumbled, not looking up. "It was my dad's. Remus gave it to me."

"May I see it?" Lindell asked. Harry glanced up at her. He was loath to part with it, even for a moment, but seeing a peculiar glint in her eyes, he acquiesced, careful not to upset his glasses as he drew the chain up over his head. Professor Lindell took the amulet from him reverently and adjusted her glasses to peer at it closely over the tops of them.

"Did Professor Lupin explain to you what it is?" she asked him.

Harry frowned. "It's just an amulet my dad found in a second hand shop."

"Actually, it's a good deal more than that," Professor Lindell replied, turning the amulet over in her hands. "This is a reliquary."

"A what?"

Professor Lindell glanced up at him over her glasses and raised an eyebrow. "An artifact, Mr. Potter, created for the purpose of storing spells, or in this case, a single spell; it doesn't seem large enough to hold more than one."

Harry frowned. Remus had mentioned something about a charm, but he had said that they had never been able to make it work. "What kind of spell?" he asked curiously.

"It could be almost anything," Lindell replied, turning one of the little rings with the tip of her finger. "Most charms can be stored to be triggered for use at another time if one has the proper receptacle. This one..." she frowned at the amulet. "This one seems to be locked."

"Locked?" Harry repeated, dumbly.

"Mmm..." Professor Lindell agreed. She sniffed loudly and passed the amulet back to him. "It looks like it's a puzzle," she said simply. "Solve the puzzle and you unlock the spell. However, if it hasn't shown any magical properties in all this time, I would assume that it is empty. The spell must have been used up."

Harry took the amulet back and quickly placed the chain once more around his neck. He looked down at the little red stone in the center before tucking it neatly back into the collar of his shirt.

"Well," Professor Lindell said briskly. "I think that should be all for today, Mr. Potter. I want you to keep practicing..." Harry suppressed a groan. "And don't bother telling me that you can't. You live with an entire house full of people; surely one of them will assent to help you."

On his way down to the Great Hall for lunch, Harry pondered how exactly one asked for help practicing Legilimency. *Excuse me, but I was wondering, would you mind terribly if I poked about in your brain a bit? I just need to have a look at all of your most private memories. It's for my homework, you see...*

His stomach growled noisily as the warm smells of bangers and mash floated to meet him. He turned instinctively towards the Gryffindor table where Ron and Hermione were already sitting, when something caught his eye.

Gwyn was standing up at the Ravenclaw table, waving her arms frantically at him. Harry swerved and made a bee line for her. Then he noticed that Justin was sitting next to Padma and looking rather uncomfortable.

"What's up?" he asked.

Gwyn grinned and gave him a quick peck on the cheek, thoroughly amused by Harry's embarrassment. "Well, I just thought we all ought to eat lunch together! I mean, we're kind of a team now, right? The Anti-Snape Defense League -- or something. But we only ever do boring stuff like *study...*" Padma rolled her eyes, but she was smiling. Justin looked like he might be choking on one of his sausages.

"Erm, that's a nice idea," Harry said uncertainly, "but won't we get into trouble sitting over here?"

"That's what I said," Justin grumbled. He glanced about the hall shiftily as though he was ready to bolt at the first sign of trouble.

Padma shook her head. "We looked it up," she said simply. "It's traditional for Hogwarts students to eat with their housemates, but it's not a rule."

"And if it's not a rule," Gwyn added, pulling Harry down onto the bench next to her, "then we can't get in trouble for it, can we?"

"S'pose not," Harry agreed, still a little confused, but pleasantly so. A plate appeared in front of him and he obligingly began serving himself. He wondered idly if Ravenclaw food would taste different than Gryffindor food.

"Er..." Justin said in an unhappy whisper. "I think people are staring." Gwyn immediately started glaring around the room indiscriminately.

"They're just not used to seeing people from different houses mingling like this," Padma said primly, "but I think it's a grand idea. We shouldn't be so divided all the time. It's like the sorting hat said; it makes us weaker. I think we're setting a very good example." Justin nodded, but Harry thought he looked as though he didn't really want to be an example -- good or otherwise.

"You should bring that up with Hermione next time," Harry said.

"Next time?" Padma looked confused.

Harry grinned innocently. "Course! Next time we have lunch together and you lot all come round to Gryffindor table!" Padma's look of smug superiority began to slide off her face.

"Hallo Harry," someone said vaguely. Harry looked up as Luna dropped down onto the seat next to him. "What are you doing here?"

"Having lunch, it seems," Harry said with a grin.

Luna cocked her head to one side as she stared at him a bit blankly. "But won't Ron mind?"

Harry frowned. "Mind?" He twisted around in his seat and looked back over his shoulder towards the Gryffindor table. Ron was staring at him. Glowering at him, actually, but as soon as he saw

Harry turned around, he ducked his head and started studying his lunch intently. Hermione, who had her back to Harry, turned in her seat. She smiled slightly and gave a little wave. Harry waved back.

"Oh, who cares what he thinks?" Gwyn huffed. "What's his problem, anyway? He's been downright rude lately. Did you see the way he was acting in Herbology last class? He practically threw that tray of Monkswood seeds at me when I asked him to pass them."

"Yeah," Harry said, turning back to his lunch with one final glance at Ron. "He's been in a right mood for weeks. At first I thought it was to do with the Quidditch match, but now..."

"I thought he did very well," Luna said. She was openly staring over her shoulder at Ron as she nibbled delicately on a cooked carrot from the end of her fork.

"Oy! Heads up!" Justin hissed suddenly. "Malfoy at three o'clock!" They all turned to look, except for Luna, who was still watching Ron. Malfoy saw them and hesitated, a look of confusion passing over his face. Gwyn gave him a huge smile and waved. Unfortunately, she only used one finger. Malfoy's eyes narrowed and he made a quick change in direction, heading for the other end of the hall.

Padma was watching Malfoy, her expression troubled. Harry caught her eye and she sighed slightly. "I don't like it," she said quietly. "He's been over here two or three times a week."

"Doing what?" Harry demanded.

Padma shrugged. "Just making snide comments, really, but it's the way he says them more than what he says."

"And he's always lurking about after lessons like he's waiting for her," Justin added. "Bad form, all 'round."

"He's just a blowhard with a stupid crush," Gwyn said vehemently. "All bark and no bite. Nothing I can't handle." She began sawing her sausages with a bit more fervor than was probably necessary, and Harry glanced across the table at Justin and Padma, who shared his worried expression.

"I think Ron's upset," Luna said suddenly. They all turned to look at her. She gazed around at each of them in turn. "I'm going to go cheer him up."

Harry snorted. "Good luck with that," he said, but Luna didn't seem to hear him. She gathered up her plate and headed for the Gryffindor table.

Gwyn giggled. "I think someone's got a crush on our friend Ron," she said, waggling her eyebrows suggestively. Justin looked amused, and Padma smiled slightly.

"You think so?" Harry frowned, trying to look over his shoulder unobtrusively.

"Where have you been living, under a rock?" Padma snorted. "Luna's fancied Ron since last year!" Harry stared at her dumbly and she giggled. "Why do you think she was always wearing that ridiculous hat and cheering for Gryffindor?"

"Huh," Harry said, furrowing his brow. "D'you think I should tell Ron?" Padma and Gwyn burst into giggles.

"Nah," Gwyn said through her laughter. "I think it's better if you let him figure it out on his own."

Harry rolled his eyes. "That could take ages..." For some reason, this made Gwyn and Padma laugh all the more.

"No way!" Ron said vehemently as they walked towards the Room of Requirement later that night. "No offense Harry, but I saw the way you used to look when you came back from Occlumency

lessons with Snape, and I wouldn't wish that on my worst enemy." He looked thoughtful for a moment. "Well, maybe Malfoy."

Harry scowled. If his own best mate didn't trust him to, he doubted that anyone else would want him poking about in their head. Then again, he and Ron had been less than friendly lately, and Harry's change of scenery at lunch hadn't helped anything. Maybe his refusal had something to do with that.

Harry glanced over at Hermione, who was judiciously avoiding his gaze, clearly hoping not to be asked. He scowled some more.

The Room of Requirement was just as it always was for them. Harry had grown so accustomed to the bookshelves and cushions and dark detectors, he sometimes found himself forgetting that it could be anything else. He glanced over at the wall where the large Foe Glass hung. A shadowy figure was lurking just out of sight, features blurred by the grey mist that normally filled the mirror. It gave Harry pause, but he supposed he didn't have to worry until he saw the whites of the eyes, or so he'd been told.

One by one the DA members started filling the room. They'd begun dueling in earnest now, putting their jinxes, hexes, and blocking spells to good use. More than a few of them habitually left sporting bruises and sprains, but no one complained.

"I've been thinking," Hermione said as she began setting out the cushions, "maybe we ought to learn a few healing spells as well; just basic first aid. It might come in handy."

Harry nodded as he watched Ron, who was whipping his wand out of his pocket again and again, practicing to outdraw an attacker. "But who are we going to get to teach us?" Harry asked. "I mean, I don't know any healing spells. Do you?"

Hermione shook her head. "They're different magic than we usually learn around here, but I'm sure I could find a few good books..." She wandered over to the bookshelf and started examining the titles.

The door opened and Ron whirled around, drawing his wand fiercely just as Neville walked into the room. Neville jumped.

"Ha!" Ron laughed triumphantly. "Sorry, mate. Just practicing, you know. Wanna have a go?" Neville recovered himself and shook his head vaguely as he bypassed Ron to go speak to Harry. Ron frowned.

"I think the new people are all caught up," he said breathlessly. "I mean, we haven't done Patronuses yet, but I thought you would probably review those with everybody later."

"You're already caught up?" Harry asked, surprised. Neville smiled broadly and nodded.

"We've been working really hard," he said proudly. "Some of them are getting awfully good. Phoebe's got an *Expelliarmus* that'll knock your socks off." He grinned. "Literally." Ron wandered towards them.

"Isn't she that Slytherin?" he asked.

"Yeah, why?"

Ron shrugged. "I dunno. I just don't think it's a very good idea to be teaching Slytherin's how to duel, that's all."

Neville frowned. "She's not like Malfoy and his lot, and neither is Terrance," he said, flushing slightly. "I think they've got as much right to learn how to defend themselves as any of us, right Harry?" Harry agreed. Ron scowled.

As soon as everyone had arrived, Harry paired them up and began making his way around between the pairs, correcting people now and then and observing how they were working together. He felt a mounting sense of pride as he watched them.

Suddenly, a loud crash burst out over the sounds of the duels going on around him. Harry whirled towards the noise, his wand at the ready. Several other people followed his lead until there were more than half a dozen wands pointing at the figure in the open doorway.

"Gwyn!" Harry exclaimed, surprised to see her. "What are you doing here? Did you come to--" He took a few steps towards her and realized almost immediately that something wasn't right. Her eyes were wide and red, her hair tousled and windblown, and her robes half open. "What's wrong?" he asked.

Gwyn took a step backwards towards the open door. She was staring around at the room full of people, several of whom were still energetically cursing one another. She threw a wide-eyed glance at Harry, and opened her mouth to speak, but no sound came out. She paused, putting her hand to her throat.

"What's wrong?" Harry asked again, worry clouding his thoughts.

Gwyn opened her mouth again, but still, no sound came out.

"What's she doing here?" Ron demanded, coming up behind Harry. "How did you know where we were? Harry, did you tell her about the Room--"

"Shut up, Ron," Harry barked. He moved towards Gwyn again and reached for her hand, but she pulled away from him, continuing to point at her throat. "Tell me what's wrong!" he pleaded softly, aware that the entire club was now staring. Padma and Justin pushed to the front of the crowd.

"I don't think she can, Harry," Hermione said suddenly. She pointed her wand at Gwyn. "*Finite Incantatem.*" Gwyn coughed slightly.

"Thanks," she said. Her voice was hoarse and strained, as though she'd been yelling. She glanced around at the many faces that were now turned towards her. "I-- I'm sorry. I didn't know anyone would be here. I'd better..." She turned and started out of the room.

"Hang on!" Harry said, catching her arm gently. She flinched at his touch and he frowned in concern. "What are you doing here? Who hexed you?"

"I just... I didn't..." She took a deep breath to steady herself. "I was coming to practice. I didn't know you would be in here."

"Practice?" Ron repeated, an ugly scowl on his face.

"Ron, shush!" Hermione hissed.

"Where's your violin, then?" Harry asked gently, ignoring Ron as best he could. Gwyn stared at him blankly.

"What did you do to your face?" Justin asked, his voice tinged with concern. Gwyn put her hand up to her cheek quickly, but not before Harry saw a crescent of red marks there. She quickly turned her head away.

"Answer the questions!" Ron yelled. "I want to know what the bloody hell you're doing here! You're just using *our* room that *we* found..." Ron turned to Harry, his face beginning to turn an ugly shade of red. "What do you do, come here to snog?"

"Shut UP, Ron!" Harry yelled, rounding on him. Gwyn whirled around and started out the door again. Harry made to follow her.

"Neville! Take over! Get everybody back to work!" Harry caught a glimpse of Neville's wide eyed terror and Ron's red faced fury before he dashed out the door.

"Wait a minute!" he called, catching Gwyn again. "Tell me what's going on!"

"I just... Accident. Really..." She stared up at him, and Harry realized that she looked like she was about to cry. It threw him; he'd never seen her this upset before. "I'm not going to discuss it, Harry. I just want to be alone."

"I don't think you should be," he countered, now genuinely worried. "Something happened to you. Something bad?" She shrugged away from his outstretched hand, taking a deep breath.

"Just let it go, Harry." Her voice was controlled now, and very hard. "It's nothing. I don't want to talk about it, OK?" She glared up at him, eyes dry and glinting angrily.

"You'd better get back to your club," she said firmly, taking a step away from him. Harry nodded vaguely. Gwyn turned and walked away, and Harry stayed where he was, waiting for her to change her mind, the way she had before, and come back to tell him what was bothering her, arms around his shoulders.

But she never did.

Justin flopped down, face buried in his stack of books, and moaned pitifully. "We will never finish this essay," he complained. "We'll be stuck here all through Christmas holidays with no presents, and no puddings, and nothing to keep us company but Snape's blasted essay."

"That's the spirit," Padma muttered acerbically. She had one quill tucked behind her ear, and another in her hand as she scribbled down notes from the treatise she was currently reading. It was Sunday night, and the four of them had been diligently researching the effects of the lunar cycle on various magical maladies, potions, and ingredients in the library all weekend long.

Harry turned a page in his book and found himself almost wishing that Justin's prediction were true, as it would mean that he would at least have some company for the holidays. Ron wasn't speaking to him at all any more. Had they been a few years younger, there would probably be a thick black line drawn down the center of the sixth year boys' dormitory; they were far too mature for that, however, and so each had instead gone about his weekend as though the other didn't exist. Harry had actually relished the difficult research project for the asylum it offered him from the angry redhead glaring at him across the Gryffindor common room.

"Ugh. Bloody lunar cycles. Bloody moon. Stupid bloody healing potions and moons, mooncalves and their dung, and bloody great tides and..." Justin was rambling as he folded the corners of his parchment. Talking ceaselessly about nothing was, Harry had come to understand, Justin's preferred mechanism of procrastination. They had all quickly learned to tune him out when he was in that mood.

Harry rested his head lethargically in one hand and stared over at Gwyn, sitting across the table from him. She was doodling intricate little treble clefs in the margins of her essay. He hadn't yet been able to convince her to tell him what had happened Friday night, and although she acted cheerfully enough around him, Harry was concerned by small changes in her behavior. He had grown used to the way she reached for his hand when they were together, the way she stood on her tiptoes to give him a kiss on the cheek when she thought it would make him blush, the way she snickered and laughed under her breath, but she hadn't done any of those things all weekend. He wondered if it was his imagination, or if she was actively avoiding contact with him. He wondered vaguely if she'd been talking to Cho again. Maybe Cho had told her something that had upset her on Friday night. Maybe she'd changed her mind about him entirely...

He decided to make a test. While she concentrated on her doodles, he slowly reached across the table for the book lying next to her on the table. Reaching for the text, he let his fingers graze the back of her hand. Gwyn's head snapped up and she recoiled as though he'd given her a static shock. He opened his mouth to ask her what was the matter, but was cut off by Padma slamming her book shut.

"I can't listen to this any more!" she cried in exasperation. "You and your stupid waffle! Can't you just shut up and read for ten minutes?" She glared menacingly at Justin, opening his mouth to argue, and she gathered all her books together. Turning, she stomped out of the library.

Wide eyed and slack-jawed, Justin turned towards Harry and Gwyn. Gwyn giggled.

"She's just stressed out," Harry said consolingly. "Don't take it personally."

Justin snorted. "Actually, I'm glad. If she's done for the night, then I can go too." He grabbed his own books and parchments and headed for the exit. "Night!"

"Bye," Gwyn said absently, returning to her doodles. Harry watched her for a minute more, but she was absorbed and oblivious to his gaze.

"So," she said finally, "are you going to call it a night, too?" She didn't look up at him.

Harry shrugged. "Might as well. I've got other lessons besides potions, after all. Lindell's still on me to find somebody to practice Legilimency with, and Hermione's busy babysitting Ron..."

Gwyn snorted. She glanced up at him at last, and her expression was sympathetic. "He was pretty pissed off about me showing up at your meeting, wasn't he?"

Harry shrugged. "I don't know what the big deal is. I mean, it's not like the club's some big secret any more. He's just got his knickers in a twist over something and instead of coming out and saying what it is, he just blows up about stupid stuff that doesn't really mean anything."

"Well," Gwyn said with a sigh, "I'm sorry all the same." Normally, Harry thought, she would have reached across the table to take his hand. Tonight she didn't.

"What about you?" he asked, carefully keeping his voice neutral. "Are you okay?"

Gwyn glanced down uncomfortably, and spoke in a voice that was deliberately cheery. "Sure! Why wouldn't I be?"

Harry frowned. "Well, it's just that you--"

"You know, I could help you practice Legilimency," she suggested, smiling up at him. "If you wanted."

Harry looked at her, surprised. "Really? I didn't think..."

"Sure!" she said quickly. "What do I do?"

Harry got the distinct impression that she was changing the subject, but he also knew that Professor Lindell wouldn't accept his excuses for much longer. Sighing inwardly, he reached for his wand.

"Ok then. Close your eyes," he said, and she obeyed. "We'll see if I can make this work."

"I hope you're better at Legilimency than you are at Potions," she said wryly, eyes closed tight. "Should I be worried about you scrambling my brains?"

Harry pointed his wand at her and concentrated. "*Legilimens!*"

Images came streaming at him all at once, as though he had loosed a flood. One of the courtyards off the Entrance Hall. A wand in his face. A swirl of black robes. A rough stone wall. Pain in his arm. Shadows on the ground. Clouds parting to reveal a single star in the black sky.

Gwyn gasped and Harry opened his eyes, frowning. This was nothing like practicing with the reserved Professor Lindell. It was too confusing, and it was as though he were seeing all the memories from Gwyn's point of view, rushing and roaring without perspective or conscious thought. There was a way around that, he remembered, that Professor Lindell had explained.

"Woah," Gwyn said, her voice shaky. "Is that what's supposed to happen?"

Harry nodded. "Sort of," he said. "I'm going to try again."

Gwyn didn't respond, so Harry pointed his wand again. "*Legilimens.*"

Again, the rush of images almost overpowered him, but this time he pushed, the way he did when trying to reach into Professor Lindell's mind, only instead of reaching in, he was slowly backing out. Abruptly, the images resolved themselves into a single scene. It was like looking down into a pensive; the colors were grey and muted, and the light was ghostly pale. Harry was reminded forcefully of his dream, but pushed the thought aside, trying to concentrate.

Gwyn waved goodbye to Justin and took, as was her custom, the shortcut through a little courtyard on her way to Ravenclaw tower. Harry wondered vaguely when this memory had taken place, and was about to move past it when he saw a flash of blond hair slip out of the shadows behind her and begin to follow. She didn't hear Malfoy coming. She didn't know he was there.

Harry's heart pounded in his ears, as his breath quickened. He had a feeling he knew *exactly* when this memory had taken place, and began to slip out of the moment, recalling the sounds of dueling students, a door burst open, red rimmed eyes. Then he forced himself to concentrate, and the images from Gwyn's mind coalesced once more.

They entered the silent, empty courtyard, Malfoy only a few steps behind Gwyn now. The space was deserted at this time of night, its trees bare and silver in the dreamlike light, high stone walls closing in like a box. Harry resisted the ridiculous yet overwhelming urge to call out, to warn her. A wash of sensations flowed over him: cold, dark, hungry, hurried, dinner, essay, music... Gwyn was mentally listing things she needed to do that evening. Suddenly, Malfoy stepped on a twig which cracked like a shot in the silent courtyard.

Everything stopped, and Harry felt his -- *Gwyn's* -- heart jump into his throat in surprise.

Gwyn whirled around. She barely had time to register a look of surprise before the words left his lips.

"*Silencio!*" he hissed as her lips parted, eyes wide and afraid. Harry could feel his fists clenching tightly, fingernails digging into his palm as Gwyn did the same. Harry's first reaction was to reach for his wand, but stood mesmerized by the scene before him.

Malfoy was beside her in a breath, one of her wrists closed in his hand. Harry opened his mouth to yell, to shout, but no sound came out into the frigid yard. Gwyn's mouth was working feverishly, but all she could hear was the crunch of dry leaves underfoot.

Malfoy smiled.

She tried to wrench her arm out of his grasp, but he tightened his grip on her wrist and twisted her arm, until she hissed. He watched with obvious pleasure as her expression changed from angry indignation to anguish, the breath forced out of her lungs in a sharp gasp of pain. She froze immediately, leaning towards him to ease the sting. He wrapped his wand arm around her waist and pulled her closer, his other arm still twisting hers painfully behind his back. Gwyn inhaled raggedly and smelled his cologne: expensive, musky, and rank.

Her arm still in his iron grasp, he backed her swiftly up against one of the cold stone walls of the courtyard, and her head banged painfully against the granite. She strained to move away from him, ears ringing from the blow, but he had the advantage of both height and weight; no matter how hard she struggled, she remained pinned. Maneuvering her arms behind her back, he quickly

cast an Incarcerus spell, causing thin silver cords to shoot from the end of his wand and bind her wrists. Hands safely bound, wand ready in case she moved, he surveyed his work.

She had stopped trying to speak, and set her lips in a thin, hard line. She watched Malfoy warily, following his every movement. Her limbs were tensed, and her heart echoed loudly in her ears, drowning out all other sound.

Malfoy bent his head close to her ear, blond hair grazing her cheek. His whispered words were lost in the pounding of her heart, but his breath was hot and clammy and she flinched as he pressed his body firmly up against her. He gripped her arm to emphasize his words. She grimaced and tried not to gag from fear and revulsion.

He released her arm, but kept her pinned between his body and the ancient stone wall. She glared at him as she worked her hands frantically behind her back. The spell had been sloppily cast, and the cords were loose. Her skin scraped painfully against the cold rough stone of the wall, but she didn't stop. Malfoy, intent on the fear and hatred in her eyes, didn't seem to notice, and she tried to hiss as he pressed even closer. Her defiance seemed to thrill him; she felt it, and inhaled sharply.

Wand firmly in his fist, Malfoy pinned her shoulder against the wall. With his left hand he cupped her face, stroking her cheekbone with the ball of his thumb. His eyes never left hers as he leaned forward and pressed his lips firmly against hers. She tried to turn away but he tightened his grip, pressing his fingers into her face, digging his nails into her cheek. He tasted like salt and licorice.

Suddenly, Gwyn felt the cords give. She jerked her knee into his groin with the ferocity of a caged lion, and Malfoy stumbled backwards, gasping. She was yelling again, calling him every foul thing she could think of, words catapulting through her head though they left her lips without a sound. She wrenched her arms apart, the delicate silver cords snapping and falling to the ground, and she fled into the castle, leaving Malfoy prone in the dirt, broken and alone.

Harry gasped for air and opened his eyes. His stomach churned dangerously, and he thought for a moment that he might be sick. Gwyn's eyes were closed, jaw clenched, and head bowed. There were silent tears running down her face, and she was clutching Harry's hand so fiercely he had to try not to wince in pain. He did not know what to say. There were no words.

Harry felt six years' accumulated hatred boiling inside of him, but he took a deep breath, pushing it back down. There would be time for vengeance later. For now, he reached out and wrapped his arms around Gwyn, pulling her into a tight embrace. Instinctively, she pulled away, her body rigid and tense. After a moment, however, he felt her relax as hot tears spilled onto his shoulder and he heard a heart wrenching sob.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE: Transcendental Transmogrification

Harry felt that he was being terribly calm and reasonable. In fact, considering that he had just learned that the foulest, most loathsome creature to ever walk the face of the earth had attacked his girlfriend, and that she had not seen fit to tell him about it until he -- quite literally -- pried it out of her, he felt as though his prodigious calm and reason deserved some sort of commendation. He had a deep seeded urge to yell at someone and possibly to kick and or punch things. He ignored it. His scar was burning as though someone were stabbing him with white hot needles and it made him want to scream. He ignored that as well. Instead, he walked Gwyn back to her tower, kissed her gently on the forehead, and allowed her to hug him for as long as she needed before seeing her safely into her common room. Totally calm. Totally composed.

The statue guarding the Ravenclaw dormitory had hardly finished sliding back into place before he turned on his heel and strode purposefully for the dungeons. It wasn't even a conscious decision, really. The only thoughts he could identify were muddled with Gwyn's; horrible images of that depraved cur's face plastered against hers, disjointed impressions of fear and pain that were not his own, and the smoldering desire to exact his revenge. He looked up, and was unsurprised to find himself crouched behind a suit of armor, staring at the corridor down which he knew the Slytherin dormitories to lie. It was a bit of knowledge learned in his second year and filed away for just this sort of occasion. Well. Perhaps not exactly this sort of occasion.

Wand clenched in his fist, Harry stood around the corner from the entrance to the Slytherin common room, opposite a large, rather ugly tapestry of a scene that reminded Harry of pictures he'd seen in Muggle museums of the Garden of Eden, full of snakes and vines and apple trees. The thought occurred to him that he was out after hours, and while that alone did not bother him very much, he was also without his usual arsenal of detention avoidance gear, namely, his invisibility cloak and the Marauder's Map

His plan, such as it was, was to ambush the next Slytherin that passed and force him or her to let him into the common room at wand point, after which, Harry would find the slimy bastard and do unspeakable things to him. Harry hadn't yet decided which unspeakably terrible things they would be, but he reckoned inspiration would guide him. Perhaps he would start with the same mouth vanishing curse that the tosser had used on Neville -- that would teach him to go around kissing unwilling girls...

Of course, he hadn't reckoned on standing out in the corridor for quite so long, on it being quite so cold in the dungeons, or on his anger slowly cooling with the temperature. As he shivered and blew on his hands quietly, he remembered guiltily that he'd promised Gwyn not to tell anyone about what he'd seen. He'd also promised her that he wouldn't do anything rash like confront Malfoy. She'd gone on and on about fighting her own battles and karma and Merlin knows what else and, as she'd still been terrifyingly close to tears, he had quickly and calmly agreed to all her terms despite his ever growing rage.

The more he thought about it, as a matter of fact, his plan was ill-advised on several counts. First of all, he realized belatedly, there weren't likely to be many Slytherins passing, as it was already well after curfew. He couldn't just stand there all night on the off chance that someone else was out breaking rules.

In addition, this course of action would require him to hold off an entire dormitory of Slytherins by himself. While the idea had seemed possible a little less than an hour ago, when he had been high on adrenaline and rage, it was now teetering dangerously towards the improbable.

Finally -- and this was the most crushing blow of all -- if he attacked that wretched worm in the Slytherin dormitory, there would be no way to avoid severe recriminations, except perhaps by disclosing Gwyn's story. And that would mean breaking her trust.

Harry sighed, deflated.

The walk back up to Gryffindor Tower took far longer than usual as he had to keep dodging behind statues and into empty classrooms whenever he heard a sound that might be Filch, Mrs. Norris, or any one of the other nasty things or people he did not want to meet up with tonight. He whispered the password to the fat lady, who asked loudly for him to repeat himself twice before she would let him in, and strode straight across the common room towards the boys' staircase with only one thought: he had to tell Ron what had happened and enlist his help in plotting the ferret's demise. It was only as he put his foot on the first stair that he remembered Ron wasn't speaking to him.

"Harry James Potter!"

Harry froze. There was a terrible half second in which he thought his Aunt Petunia had inexplicably turned up in the Gryffindor common room; she was the only person who had ever addressed him using his middle name in *that* tone of voice before.

"Where on earth have you been? I've been worried sick! Do you have *any* idea what time it is?"

Harry turned very slowly to see Hermione marching across the room towards him in her dressing gown and slippers. Her hair was plaited neatly in two pigtails on either side of her head, like Heidi, Harry thought. But her expression was hardly that of a good-natured goat girl.

"Er..." he said, unnerved by the ferocity of her glare.

"Where were you?" she demanded, hands on her hips and looking far more threatening than anyone of her size had any right to.

"I was with Gwyn," Harry said quickly, heading for a chair into which he could collapse. "You knew that. We were studying in the library."

Hermione followed him, still looking every bit like an enraged lion -- in pigtails. "Harry, the library closed *two hours ago*."

"Really?" He hadn't realized he'd been standing in the corridor for so long.

Hermione crossed her arms over her chest and raised her eyebrows at him. "Have you and Gwyn been--"

"I beg you not to finish that sentence," Harry implored quickly, his mind reeling at the very idea of discussing anything of that sort with Hermione. "Gwyn and I were doing some homework, and then I walked her back to her room."

"Don't be a prat," Hermione retorted as she flopped into another armchair. "It doesn't take two hours to get to the Ravenclaw dormitories. Honestly Harry..." She shook her head and folded her hands in her lap.

"I thought..." she began softly. "I thought someone might have attacked you, and I didn't know what to do! Ron was acting like it didn't matter if anything happened to you and went to bed early, and I didn't know whether I ought to go looking for you or--"

Harry could see that she was biting her lip, and it made his insides twist guiltily. He put a hand out onto her knee and she looked up at him. "I'm fine," he said, a bit bewildered by her sudden emotional shifts. "Why would you think anything bad had happened?"

Hermione gave him an incredulous look. "Harry. You've been attacked twice! And nobody knows who it was or why and I just thought..." She took a deep breath and seemed to steady herself. "Honestly. If I didn't know better, I'd think you didn't care. If you weren't with Gwyn, then where have you been all this time? And don't bother lying to me. I always know."

Harry sighed deeply. As Ron couldn't seem to be bothered about whether or not he was even alive, he began telling Hermione what had happened. Once he started, he found he couldn't stop, and the story spilled out faster and faster. Hermione's anger morphed into wide-eyed shock as Harry told her what he had seen in Gwyn's memory. By the time he was finished, her eyes were huge and horrified, and she had both of her hands pressed over her mouth.

"After I walked her to her room I went down to the dungeons," Harry finished.

"To do what?" Hermione asked in a tiny voice, barely above a whisper. Harry shrugged, defeated.

"Nothing. I had a really terrible plan that involved hiding behind a suit of armor for two hours and having a blazing good row with him in my head several times. And then I came back here."

Hermione stared at him for a few moments and then abruptly leapt to her feet.

"Where are you going?" Harry asked wearily.

"To tell McGonagall," she replied simply. Harry launched himself after her and barely reached her before she got to the door.

"You can't!" he exclaimed, catching her around the shoulders. "You can't even let on that you know. I promised her that I wouldn't tell *anyone*." Harry fought the urge to punch something or, alternatively, to break down and cry. "But I had to tell somebody what that scum did to her..." His scar was burning again, and this time he didn't have the white hot searing rage to distract from it. He swallowed hard.

Hermione seemed to recognize his dilemma. She put her hands up onto his arms and, abruptly, the pain was gone.

"It's okay, Harry," she said softly. "I understand. But somebody needs to be told. You're just going to have to try to convince Gwyn to... What?"

"How do you do that?" Harry asked breathlessly.

Hermione shook her head at him. "Do what?"

"That's the second time," he went on quickly. "My scar starts hurting and then somehow you just make it go away and..." Hermione was staring at him as though he'd gone completely off his rocker. "Just now!" he exclaimed. "It was hurting just now, and you put your hands on my arms and it went away."

Hermione released him and stepped quickly out of his grasp. "But I didn't... I mean, I didn't even know it was hurting, Harry. How could I have-- Ron!" Harry whirled around and saw the back of Ron's head as he ran up the stairs.

"Bollocks," Harry said with feeling.

Hermione spent all day Monday with Harry, verbally poking and prodding him towards convincing Gwyn to report Malfoy. Whenever Gwyn was around, Hermione ended up looking sympathetic and sad until Harry elbowed her or trod on her foot to remind her that she didn't know.

Unfortunately, Hermione's unflagging campaign to convince Harry to go to the authorities meant that Ron was left alone to sulk and brood in all their classes. The change was not for the better, and Harry lay awake long into the night listening to Ron's ragged breathing and wondering if he were planning what hexes to use as soon as Harry fell asleep.

The next morning, Hermione came into the Great Hall a few minutes after Harry looking no better than he felt. "Have you spoken to Gwyn yet?" she asked, taking the seat next to him.

"She's not here," Harry replied dully. "And regardless of what you think, or how often you tell me what you think, talking to her isn't going to help. Perhaps you hadn't noticed, but she's an incredibly willful person."

Hermione huffed and seemed about to comment on that, when Ron and Ginny walked into the hall. Ron saw the two of them sitting together, physically halted in his tracks, grabbed Ginny by the arm, and quickly turned for the exit. Hermione sighed unhappily.

"I suppose it would be too much to ask if you'd talked to him?" she said wearily. "How long do you think you two are going to keep this up? It's exhausting being the middle man in this friendship." Harry thought very seriously about mentioning exactly how many times he'd played the go-between when she and Ron were fighting, but managed to hold his tongue.

Ginny appeared again at the entrance to the Great Hall, looking cross, and headed directly for them, quickly sliding into the seat opposite Harry. "Morning," she said grumpily as she reached for a piece of toast. "Harry, could I have a word?"

What a git, he thought vehemently, sending his sister to talk to me instead of talking to me himself... Harry tried not to look surly as he stared down at his porridge and shrugged.

"Er, well, could we talk in private?" she said glancing momentarily at Hermione, who looked mildly scandalized at not being included. "Only it's sort of personal..."

"Whatever he told you to tell me, you can say it in front of Hermione," Harry snapped.

Ginny frowned at him. "He who?" she asked.

Harry rolled his eyes. "Don't play stupid, Ginny. It doesn't suit you. Whatever Ron wants you to tell me--"

"Oh I see," Ginny interrupted testily. "That's the only reason I could *possibly* want to talk to you, because Ron sent me, is that it? The two of you are so wrapped up in yourselves that you probably wouldn't even notice if the school burned down!" She stood up abruptly. "I have about had it up to here with the both of you! If you don't pull your head out of your arse pretty quick, Harry Potter, you're going to lose more than one friend!" With a swirl of robes, Ginny turned and stomped away.

Hermione shook her head in pity, and Harry scowled. They finished their breakfasts in pensive silence before gathering their things and walking to Professor Lindell's classroom. As they entered, Harry saw that Ron was already sitting on the far side of the room between Seamus and Dean giving Harry a narrow eyed stare.

"This has *got* to stop..." Hermione muttered as she and Harry took their usual seats.

Professor Lindell entered the room from her office and began at once with the notes on the blackboard. Harry had long resigned himself to the fact that Lindell only seemed interested in teaching them defense theory rather than practice, and while the theory she was teaching was occasionally interesting, it still wasn't the same as raising a wand to practice.

Harry glanced up at the blackboard where Lindell was instructing the chalk in which notes to copy, and he noticed that the heading was "Dueling: Rules of Engagement in Theory and Practice."

"Are we going to start dueling, Professor?" Harry asked eagerly.

Lindell turned a sharp eye on him and raised an eyebrow. "Why, Mr. Potter? Do you feel some desperate need to be hexed? If so, I could accommodate you, I'm sure." A soft chorus of laughter rippled through the room, broken by Ron's loud, obnoxious guffaws.

"Well," Harry said, trying to ignore Ron, "not particularly, but I'm sure we could all do with a bit of practice." A murmur of approval followed his statement. Professor Lindell released the chalk to do its work at the blackboard and turned to face them, dusting her hands together daintily.

"What, precisely, do you imagine we've been doing for the past nine weeks, Mr. Potter?" she asked coolly.

Harry frowned at her. "We've been taking notes," he replied defiantly.

Lindell raised her eyebrow at him again. "One could hope that you've also been *learning* a few things about spell theory, Mr. Potter. Now why, do you suppose, I would spend so much of our precious time together teaching you spell theory? Anyone?"

Hermione raised her hand. "To provide us with a base of knowledge for when we have to perform the spells."

"Yes and no," Lindell answered. She took a deep breath and sighed. "To understand a thing, you must get at the root of it. If I wanted to teach someone to read, I wouldn't begin by handing him Shakespeare's collected works; I would start by teaching him the individual letters, phonetic combinations, and so on. If one wants to learn to play an instrument, one doesn't begin with Bach. Every discipline has its building blocks, and your basic knowledge of defensive theory has been sorely lacking.

"Now, Miss Granger postulated that my intention was merely to hand you these building blocks so that you could understand the spells you already know. While learning the theory behind the casting will undoubtedly help you to perform those spells more proficiently, the real aim of these exercises is to hand you the blocks that you might build something *of your own*." She paused, gazing out at them over the tops of her oval lenses.

"You mean," Hermione said hesitantly, an eager gleam shining in her eyes, "you want to teach us to make up our own spells?"

Lindell nodded. "Precisely." She opened her leather dossier and began shuffling her notes, preparing for her lecture. "I estimate that the majority of you will be ready to begin practical

spellcasting a few weeks into the next term. Now, if you would please copy down the following terms..."

Hermione would not stop talking about the prospect of writing their own spells all through their break and Care of Magical Creatures class. Hagrid had, once again, built a huge bonfire and filled it with brightly colored salamanders as a treat for them before the holidays, and the class spent a pleasant hour or so huddled around the roaring blaze, watching the little lizards darting happily around the coals. Gwyn joined Harry and Hermione near the edge of the fire and seemed content to listen as Hermione talked endlessly about Scriptionists and spellcasting. Wordlessly, she squeezed Harry's hand.

"How are you feeling today?" Harry asked her quietly as they left the Great Hall after lunch.

"Fine!" she said briskly. "How are you?"

"You know what I mean," he prodded.

Gwyn sighed. "Harry, you promised me you would let it go."

"Only because you threatened never to speak to me again!" Harry protested.

"And don't think I won't make good on that," Gwyn said seriously. Then she relaxed and smiled again. "It's over. It's in the past, and even the great Harry Potter can't change the past -- can you?" She raised her eyebrows at him and he stared at her silently. She grinned. "Good. Then just let it go. Malfoy will get what's coming to him. It's called karma."

"I could help karma along a bit," Harry suggested. "It's called hexing."

As they rounded the corner nearest the Transfiguration classroom, Harry stopped short. Ron was standing near the door, obviously waiting for him. Gwyn glanced up at him, and Harry nodded for her to go on.

"Play nicely, boys," she cautioned, "class is about to start."

Ron stared at Harry, furrowing his brow.

"Well?" Harry said after a few moments. "Did you want something, or are we just going to have a staring contest?"

"You can be angry with me all you want," Ron growled menacingly, "but don't take it out on my sister!"

Harry blinked. "Don't be daft. I just told her that--"

"You almost made her cry!"

"Ginny? I find that hard to believe..."

"If you think that you can have a go at me by yelling at her--"

"Why would I bother having a go at you? You seem to be doing a pretty good job of making yourself miserable without my help."

Ron stared at him. "Everything's about you, isn't it? You're so wrapped up in yourself that you can't even see past those stupid glasses!"

Harry felt his blood beginning to boil. "Well, at least I don't try to live my life through somebody else!" he shouted.

Ron went suddenly pale. "What's that supposed to mean?" he demanded.

"You know exactly what it means!" Harry shouted back. "Trying to take over the Quidditch team with all your diagrams and strategies. Face it Ron, I made team captain and you didn't!"

Blood was rushing into Ron's pale face. "You bloody egotistical bastard!" he roared. "All the time I spent trying to help you out, and this is how you thank me?"

"No one asked for your help!"

"Well maybe they should have!"

"Why, so you could just panic and let everybody down again?" Harry regretted the words as soon as they were out of his mouth, but he didn't dare show it. He kept his expression hard as he watched the shock register across Ron's face. Half of him wanted to put a hand out to steady Ron and to apologize profusely. The other half wanted to laugh at Ron's stupid expression.

"What is going on out here?" McGonagall demanded suddenly from her doorway. Ron whirled around and the two of them stared at her guiltily. "The lesson has already begun," she snapped. "If the two of you are quite finished?"

Anger still coursing through him in an unhealthy rush, Harry followed Ron into the classroom, staring holes into the back of his red head. He turned to his regular table, but he saw that Padma was already sitting with Gwyn. He glanced around for Hermione, but she was sitting with Neville. In fact, there was only one table left, and only two chairs.

"Do you need an invitation, Mr. Potter?" McGonagall demanded. Angrily, Harry slumped down into his seat next to Ron, crossing his arms and hunching down in his chair. They stared resolutely forward.

"As I was saying," Professor McGonagall began, still looking daggers at Harry and Ron, "today we will be starting human transfigurations. Human transfigurations are much more complex and dangerous than any other spells we have attempted in this class, and so I must ask for your complete attention and your best efforts. Anyone who decides to abuse this practice time may find themselves facing extra homework. We will start by practicing the charms on our partners, and next term you will learn how to cast the spells on yourselves."

Harry barely heard what Professor McGonagall was saying as she continued to lecture, and he barely even blinked when she demonstrated one of the spells by turning her own hair a violent shade of fuchsia. He was too busy fuming internally at Ron and carefully avoiding looking in his direction. He could feel Ron's glare on him, however, as he opened his textbook to the page McGonagall indicated. There was a table written out with the incantations for different human transfigurations with a description of the effects next to it. *Color changing, enlarging, reducing, lengthening, shortening...*

"*Exaggero nez!*" Ron said suddenly, before Harry even had a chance to finish reading the incantations. Harry felt a strange tingling sensation in his face and fought the urge to sneeze as his glasses moved and resettled in front of his eyes. He looked up at Ron who was smirking unkindly at him before he grabbed for the hand mirror that McGonagall had placed on each of the tables. His nose had grown to roughly four times its normal size and now rivaled even Snape's in crookedness and dimension. Harry glared up at Ron angrily.

"A bit overenthusiastic, Mr. Weasley," Professor McGonagall said as she passed, "but not bad for a first try." Ron cocked an eyebrow at Harry as though daring him to say something.

Harry chose his next words very carefully, working very hard to pronounce them clearly despite the size of his new nose. "*Exaggero auris!*" he said and watched, with more than a little vindictive amusement as Ron's ears began to grow. Harry didn't stop until they were roughly the size of saucers. Ron's eyes went wide with discomfort at the odd growing sensation as he grabbed for the mirror. Behind them, someone began to snigger.

"Isn't the spell supposed to do something, Harry?" Seamus asked innocently. His eyes were a disturbing amethyst color.

"Yeah, I don't think it worked..." joked Dean, whose hair had gone completely white, and although Harry could tell that their comments were good natured, Ron didn't seem to feel the same. When he set down the mirror, his face was red and his expression hateful.

"*Pilolo!*" he shouted. Harry gasped slightly as he suddenly felt very cold. He put a hand up to his head and when he felt nothing but smooth skin, he realized with horror that Ron had made him completely bald.

"*Pilosus!*" he shouted back. "*Flammeus capillatus!*" Ron's hair began to grow at an alarming rate and, as it cascaded over his shoulders, the color began to change, starting at the roots and continuing down to the very tips until it looked as though someone had doused him with bright red paint. It spilled down his head and around his face, interrupted only by his enormous ears, which parted the hair like giant boulders in a river of red.

Frustrated, Ron scrabbled with his suddenly cumbersome hair. It had grown so long that it completely obscured his face. "*Dentio croci,*" he called, his voice muffled by the long locks, but his aim was bad. Harry ducked out of the way, and the spell flew over his shoulder hitting Hermione in the back of the head.

"Hey!" she yelled angrily, turning in her seat. Harry started when he saw that her teeth had turned bright yellow.

"What is going on over here?" McGonagall demanded, striding across the room purposefully. Ron, still struggling with his Samsonite tresses, did not seem to hear.

"*Cutis aureus!*" he shouted, unwilling to be outdone by Harry. The spell hit him dead on and made him tingle all over. Harry raised his wand hand and stared at it for a split second, stunned that it was a funny gold color.

"*Livoris oculo!*" he shouted angrily. Ron, who was finally parting his hair away from his face, glared at him with brilliantly kelly-green eyes. He raised his wand threateningly.

"*Immobulus!*" Professor McGonagall shouted angrily. Harry felt as though the air around him had begun to thicken and harden like glue until he couldn't move at all. Ron, too, seemed frozen mid scowl, one hand gripping his wand, the other pushing the hair up off of his forehead.

Harry could barely move his eyes, but even though they were trained on Ron's clenched teeth, he could feel McGonagall's angry stare. She didn't say a word to them. "Back to work please!" she told the rest of the class.

By the time class was over, Harry's neck was stiff and his eyes were itching something terrible. He wondered if Ron was feeling the same. It was a little hard to tell since his expression was frozen halfway between angry retribution and utter shock.

McGonagall took her time helping students reverse transfigurations that had been carried too far, then tidied up the classroom as the rest of the students left before striding over to Harry and Ron; her *Immobulus* charm was potent, and Harry could still barely move his eyes to follow her deliberate movements.

"My classroom is not the place to act out your private squabbles," she said sternly, folding her arms over her chest as she stood over them. "I am thoroughly disappointed in both of you, that you were not able to find a more reasonable way of working out your differences. You, Mr. Weasley, are a prefect. I expect more of those chosen to lead the student body."

Harry saw Ron's eyes turn laboriously away from McGonagall. "And you, Mr. Potter," she continued, turning her thin lipped expression on him. "I would certainly have expected you to value non-violent ways of resolving conflicts."

Harry found that he, too, had to avert his eyes from Professor McGonagall's stare.

"*Finite incantatum*," she said at last, and Harry collapsed forward onto the desk. He rolled his head from one side to the other, tentatively unkinking the muscles of his neck.

"I suggest," Professor McGonagall said curtly, "that the two of you find a way to resolve this conflict before you return to my classroom." She looked from one to the other of them pointedly. "Next time, I will not be so understanding."

Attempting to hide his scowl, Harry stood quickly and scooped up his things, and stormed off towards the door. He paused when he heard Ron speak.

"Er, Professor?" Ron said, tripping over his own hair as he made to stand up. McGonagall turned to study him through narrowed eyes. Ron took a fistful of hair in each hand and parted it from his face as though it were a theater curtain. "I don't suppose you could, er..."

"Mr. Weasley," she said very dryly, "I have not yet taken any points from you or Mr. Potter for fighting during my lesson. Don't push your luck." Ron sighed.

"Besides," she added, "working together, the two of you ought to be able to put yourselves right -- eventually..."

Trying not to think about how he must look, torchlight reflecting off of his bald, golden head, Harry made his way out the classroom door and heard a gasp. Whirling around, he found Hermione and Gwyn waiting for him. Hermione seemed to be very determined to keep a straight face. Her teeth were their normal color, but her hair was much longer than usual and board straight. It made her look chic and sophisticated and not at all like herself. Gwyn walked towards him and started to laugh hysterically. Her hair was a dark auburn color. It seemed the two of them had elected to keep certain of their transfigurations.

Gwyn, grinning madly, put her hand up and started rubbing the top of his head. "You look," she said around gasps and giggles, "like a very ugly Buddha statue. If I rub your head, is it good luck?"

"Not. Funny," Harry growled.

"And you," she said, turning to Ron, "look like Cousin It, in technicolor."

Hermione seemed to have overcome her own attack of amusement and sniffed disdainfully. "You two are impossible. What were you thinking?"

"He started it!" Ron shouted, still holding his hair away from his face in both hands.

"What?" Harry demanded. "You started it! You transfigured me first."

"Shut up."

"Good comeback."

"Oh, will *both* of you just shut up?" Gwyn yelled. Ron turned to snap at her, but she hit him with such a challenging look that he just stuck his bottom lip out in an angry pout.

"I've had enough of this," Hermione said suddenly. "Come with me."

"I'm going to--" Harry started.

"No," Hermione said forcefully. "You are coming with me. *Now*." Gwyn smirked at Harry and patted him on the head.

"Don't leave me!" he pleaded under his breath.

"Good luck!" she whispered heading down the corridor.

"Hermione," Ron was saying, "I am not going to--"

"You are going to do exactly what I say," Hermione said calmly as she lead them quickly back towards Gryffindor Tower. "Unless, of course, you think you can put your hair back to normal by yourself?" She shot a derisive glance over her shoulder when Ron didn't answer. "I thought not."

As they walked, Harry saw more than a few students, even teachers, shooting amused and disbelieving glances at them. Harry was used to more than his fair share of negative attention, but Ron seemed to be taking it personally. Before they reached the portrait of the fat lady, he was audibly growling at anyone who so much as looked at them, and tightly gripping his wand.

"Oh give me that!" Hermione snapped, snatching the wand out of his fist as he threatened a horrified looking second year Hufflepuff. Ron was too surprised to argue. "And you," she said, wiping the smirk off of Harry's face as she yanked his wand out of his back pocket.

"Hey!"

"Now," Hermione said, her tone still icy as she helped Ron through the portrait hole by holding up his hair for him, "I have had enough of the two of you acting like asses to one another." She pointed at two facing armchairs in the empty common room. "Sit!" Sullenly, the two of them sank down into the chairs and glared at each other.

"Talk!" Hermione commanded. Harry and Ron stared at one another, Ron's eyes just visible beyond the curtain of bright red hair. Hermione crossed her arms and tapped her foot. The boys continued to stare.

"He started it!" Ron bellowed, ears flapping.

"What did I start?" Harry demanded.

"Picking on Ginny! Telling Gwyn about the room! Bloody Quidditch! And Neville! And Slytherins..." He gave Harry an eerie death glare with his disturbingly green eyes. "Having *LUNCH*!"

Harry stared at him, dumbfounded. "You've gone completely mental."

"Have I?" Ron demanded. "HAVE I?"

"Yes!"

"Ron!" Hermione exclaimed. "We need details. Verbs even! You're going to have to be more specific."

"You said you didn't need me," Ron growled, ignoring Hermione.

Harry shook his head at him, angrily bewildered. "What are you talking about?"

"At Quidditch practice," Ron huffed.

"I didn't say *anything* to you at our last Quidditch practice," Harry retorted. "You weren't speaking to me, remember?"

Ron turned away suddenly, apparently unwilling to look Harry in the eye. "Forget it."

"No," Harry said, a bit more calmly. "I want to know what the hell is going on with you." He paused, choosing his next words carefully. "If I've ballsed up one of the only good things in my life somehow, I'd like to know about it."

Ron looked up at him, the anger quickly draining from his expression and leaving something else that Harry couldn't quite identify.

"We were having a row," Ron began slowly, "at Quidditch practice, and I said I was just trying to help, and you said you didn't need me."

Harry frowned, trying to remember. "I said I didn't need your *help*, Ron. Right then, not ever. There's a big difference." Harry shrugged. "Plus, you were being cheeky as hell and I was getting right annoyed. I didn't really mean it."

Ron ducked his head again. "And then, you started hanging around with all your potions friends," he continued, "and you didn't ever want to hang out with me any more..."

"Because you were never around!" Harry countered. "You've been spending your free time doing Merlin knows what, since the start of term!" He stopped short and took a thoughtful breath. "What have you been doing?"

Ron shrugged. "Selling stuff for Fred and George."

"What?" Hermione asked.

Harry and Ron both looked up, having forgotten she was there. Ron nodded.

"They've been sending me boxes of stuff they're having trouble moving at the store, and I've been selling it to the sprogs around here at half price. How did you think I could afford to buy all that chocolate and butterbeer and stuff in Hogsmeade?"

"Those little sneaks!" Hermione said darkly. "I *knew* there was something going on after I took down all their order forms and still kept finding Snackboxes!" Ron glanced at Harry and gave him a small smile.

"Hermione," Harry said quickly, hoping to distract her, "are you going to leave us looking like this forever?" The novelty of watching Ron's gargantuan ears flap with every movement of his head and of listening to his own voice echoing horrifically in his cavernous nose had begun to wear thin.

"Oh!" With a few quick incantations and flicks of her wand, Harry's skin faded to its normal, non-metallic color, his nose shrunk to its regular size and shape, and -- mercifully -- his hair grew back as thick and unruly as ever. Harry watched in fascination as Ron's hair receded swiftly back into his head and slowly returned to its normal ginger shade; his eyes lost their alarming green sheen and his ears returned to their normal size -- perhaps even one smaller.

Harry found it much easier to look Ron in the face, now that he no longer had to look at evidence of their fight. "So, what was that bit about Neville, then?" he asked, hoping that now that Ron was calmer (and entirely less elephantine), he would make a bit more sense.

Ron sighed deeply. "It's nothing," he said sheepishly. "I just... It started with Neville. You put him in charge of the DA sprogs instead of me."

"I tried to put you in charge," Harry argued. "You were too busy selling Canary Creams to be interested!"

Ron shrugged. "And then you started hanging around with Padma and Justin and them lot, and you're *always* doing something with Gwyn, and I guess..." His voice trailed off.

"What was that?" Harry prodded.

"I said," Ron muttered, taking a deep breath. "I guess I reckoned you really didn't need me. At all."

Harry was silent for a long moment, staring at the top of Ron's head as Ron was bent forward studying his feet.

"You are a moron sometimes," he said at last.

Hermione glanced at him sharply and Ron looked up, angry.

"A complete and utter berk," Harry continued. "How on earth could you even *think* that I don't need you?" He didn't wait for Ron's reply. "Do you not remember the Tri-Wizard cup? They took the thing I'd miss most. Was it Hermione? Or Neville? Or Sirius or Remus? No! It was you!"

Ron made a very non-committal noise.

"And who made sure I got rescued from the Dursleys all those times? Who went into the forest with me after all those spiders -- which you *hate*?"

"Bloody gigantic spiders..." Ron said with a weak grin.

"And who..." Harry took a deep breath. "Who sat with me on the train that very first day?"

Ron looked up at last and met Harry's eyes.

Harry felt a surge of emotion deep in his chest and fought to keep his voice from breaking. "Do you know, when I came in last night, I needed to talk to someone, and my very first thought was to go upstairs and tell you all about it -- even though we were fighting. So, if you think that I'm ever going to stop needing you to be my best mate," he finished at last, "then you are much bigger idiot than I gave you credit for, and I might have to give some serious thought to being friends with someone quite *that* stupid."

Ron almost laughed, but seemed to choke on the sound at the last moment. Suddenly, Hermione gave a very loud sniff. Harry glanced over and noticed that her cheeks were wet.

"Oh, I hate you," she said, wiping her face with the back of her hand. "Both of you. Getting me all worked up like this over nothing. You're both idiots! Don't ever do this to me again -- I can't take it!" Standing up she rushed over and gave them each a hug in quick succession before dashing off towards the dormitory. Harry watched her go.

"About last night," Ron said softly, staring at the stairs that led to the girls' rooms. "I saw you and Hermione... Well, I saw you, and I thought that you and she..."

Harry shook his head. "Hermione and I are just friends," he said sincerely. "You know that."

"Right," Ron said firmly. "Right."

Hermione reappeared in the common room, blowing her nose quietly in a handkerchief. Ron was staring at her as though he was seeing her for the first time.

"What on earth did you do to your hair?"

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR: Silent Night

"I'm well sorry, mate," Ron said Saturday morning as he threw the last of his clothes and books haphazardly into his trunk. "I dunno why Mum hasn't answered yet." He threw the lid of his trunk down and promptly sat on it to get it to latch. "You could always just come on the train anyway. I mean, she's not going to turn you away once you're already there."

Harry shrugged and unwrapped another Chocolate Frog. Since his employment was no longer a secret, Ron had shown Harry all the stuff he'd bought in Hogsmeade, and the stash was even more impressive than Harry had first imagined. "It's okay," he said, trying to keep his voice light. He'd made up his mind that he would enjoy his solitude during the holidays. It wasn't that he wasn't looking forward to Christmas, but thinking about Christmas reminded him of his godfather, and the happiest he'd ever seen him. "I reckon your Mum and Dad would like to have a holiday that's just family for once," he added.

Ron shot him a funny look. "What d'you mean?"

Just then, Hermione knocked on the door frame and poked her head into the room. She had transfigured her hair back to its normal state, much to Ron's relief. He kept insisting that she didn't look anything like herself, and that he felt like he was talking to a stranger.

"So what's the verdict?" she asked, wandering over to sit next to Harry on the end of his bed. "Are you off to the Burrow for the holidays or will you be staying here?"

"Staying here," Harry announced.

Ron shrugged at him.

"Good," Hermione said breathlessly. Harry and Ron gave her an odd look. "I mean," she added quickly, "it would be rude to just show up, don't you think?"

"Shouldn't you be packing?" Ron asked as he threw an errant pair of socks into his school bag. "Train leaves in less than half an hour."

"Oh, right..." Hermione said as she hurried out of the room.

"What's with her?" Ron asked as he grabbed the last of his things. "She's being awfully vague."

Harry shrugged. "You know, she says she's glad we're on speaking terms again and everything, but I bet she's actually disappointed that she doesn't get to have you all to herself any more..."

Ron began to blush and he threw another handful of Chocolate Frogs at Harry. "Shut up," he said genially, turning to load the remaining chocolates into his bag.

"Are you ever going say anything to her?" Harry asked as he watched Ron finishing to pack.

"Bout what?"

"You know what I mean!"

Ron shrugged and Harry grinned as he watched the backs of Ron's ears turning redder.

"Harry!" Neville panted, rushing into the room. "Harry, you haven't seen Trevor, have you?"

Harry smiled and shook his head. "Sorry, I haven't."

Neville sighed. "I didn't really think so. He's gone off somewhere again. Listen, if I give you his food, would you feed him for me over the holiday?"

"Yeah, sure," Harry shrugged, "but how am I supposed to feed him if I can't find him?" Neville dug for a moment in his bag before producing a small bottle.

"Oh, you can just leave a little pile of these on my bedside table," he said, handing Harry the bottle. "That's what I do when I can't find him. He always comes out when he gets hungry enough."

Harry took the little bottle and shook it, examining the contents, which looked to be dried flies.

"Sure," he repeated heartily, "no problem." Neville smiled, relieved.

"Thanks, Harry. See you on the train, Ron!" Neville hurried out of the room.

"Yeah," Ron replied from where he was looking for something under his bed. "See you." Moments later, he reemerged, clutching his homework planner.

"Already said goodbye to Gwyn?" he asked Harry while shoving the planner into his already overfilled bag.

"No, I said I'd meet her in the Entrance Hall."

"Right, well, we'd better go then." Ron hoisted his bulging bag over his shoulder and left his trunk to be magically carried to the train.

He and Ron walked all the way down to the Entrance Hall, where students were filing out through the enormous doors and into the carriages waiting to carry them down to the train.

"You're certain you don't want to come?" Ron asked again as he hesitated by the door. Harry smiled a little more broadly.

"I am, but tell everyone hello from me."

Ron nodded. He turned towards the door, and then suddenly turned back and threw one arm around Harry's shoulders.

"Happy Christmas," he said, pounding Harry forcefully on the back several times.

"Happy Christmas, Ron," Harry gulped.

Ron nodded curtly and turned to rush out of the door yelling for Ginny to hold her carriage.

"What's this?" Gwyn asked, sidling up to Harry from behind. "Harry and Ron *hugging*? Not trying to kill each other with bad hairstyles, but *hugging*? My world's gone all askew." Harry grinned as she slipped one hand into his. "Don't tell me I've got competition for you," she continued. "I'd be crushed."

"Who, Ron? If I thought you were even remotely serious about that..." Harry laughed. "I think you'll find you like me even better when I'm not spending most of my time being angry at my best mate."

"I don't think it would be possible for me to like you any better," Gwyn said. She made a face. "Ick! When did I turn into such a saccharine sweetie? You're a bad influence on me, Potter." Harry bent down and kissed her gently, reveling in her warmth and her familiar scent.

"Mmm..." she said softly. "Not that I'm complaining..."

"Oh, get a room," someone muttered. Harry glanced up and saw Pansy Parkinson glaring at them from across the hall. Malfoy was walking past her and, for a moment, he and Harry locked eyes.

Gwyn saw Harry's expression change and squeezed his hand. She began pleading with him under her breath. "Don't say anything. I know what you want to say. Just don't, OK?"

Harry nodded, choking down the urge to turn Malfoy into something small and wiggly, and focused his attention back on Gwyn.

"Don't get too lonely in this big old drafty castle," she said in a brighter tone. "And send me an owl as soon as you open my Christmas present."

"You too," he said. "I mean, don't get too lonely in... er. London." Gwyn laughed as she stood on her tiptoes and kissed him on the cheek.

"Merry Christmas, Harry! See you next year!" She darted out into the cold and ran for a carriage where Justin was waiting and waving goodbye to Harry. Harry waved back. As Gwyn shut the door and the carriage trundled off, Harry turned and saw Malfoy waiting behind Pansy to get into his own carriage. He was watching Gwyn's carriage drive away. He turned, then, and locked eyes with

Harry. Harry frowned, wishing that he could just make Malfoy pay. Then Malfoy, like everyone else, was gone.

Sullen, and more than a little disappointed to be left behind once again, Harry headed back for Gryffindor Tower, hands shoved deep in his pockets. He usually liked Hogwarts at Christmas, when most of the students and even some of the professors were gone for the holidays. It was quiet and peaceful. And a little dull, he reminded himself. With a sigh, he gave the fat lady the password and climbed into the empty common room.

Only, it wasn't empty.

"Hermione?" he exclaimed in shock. "What are you doing here? You've got to go! The carriages have already left and the train--" He stopped as he realized she was sniffling and wiping her face. "What happened?" he asked quickly. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," she said in a falsely cheerful voice, a smile pasted onto her face. "And, it's all right about the train -- I'm not going home for Christmas." Her voice broke slightly on the word 'Christmas' and she hung her head.

"Why not?" Harry asked, dropping down onto the sofa next to her. "I thought you were spending the holidays with your parents."

Hermione nodded and swallowed hard. "Well," she said at last, "that was the plan. But my parents started getting *The Daily Prophet* after they saw me reading it over the summer."

Harry frowned, confused. "What's a newspaper got to do with your holidays?"

"There was an article in the paper, maybe a week ago, about how there have been all these mysterious attacks on Muggle-born witches and wizards, especially when they were around their Muggle family."

"You didn't say anything about that," Harry said ruefully. Normally, he relied on Hermione to pass on any relevant information from the paper, as she was the only one who read it on a regular basis.

She shrugged helplessly. "I think it scared Mum and Dad," she said softly. "They don't really understand what's going on in the wizarding world, but they're not stupid. So they wrote to Dumbledore." She took a deep breath. "And he told them that there was nowhere in the world safer than Hogwarts. After reading that, they decided I'd better just stay here for Christmas." A tear ran down her face and she brushed it absently away. "Which wouldn't be so bad," she continued, struggling to keep her voice steady, "except that I haven't seen them in such a long time because I spent most of the summer at Grimmauld Place, and what if..." Her voice trailed off, and she sniffed loudly, dabbing at her face with a rumpled handkerchief. "I mean, anything could happen, you know, to anyone, and I just want to see them."

Harry tried to smile sympathetically at her, but she wouldn't meet his eyes. His first reaction whenever Hermione started to cry was to get as far away as quickly as possible; he had absolutely no idea what to do with her. Seeing as he was the only other person around, however, he felt he ought to try something.

Awkwardly, he put his arm around her shoulders and resisted the urge to pat her and say "there, there." Hermione sniffed again and shrugged his arm off.

"It's fine," she said in her cheerful voice again. "I don't mean to be so silly, honestly. Anyway, you and I will have a grand time, won't we?"

"Of course we will," he answered quickly. "I mean, it was going to be dead boring without anyone else around. Besides," he said with a grin, "if you can't spend Christmas with your real family, you might as well spend it with your Hogwarts one."

That elicited a small smile, and she patted his knee. "Thanks Harry," she said.

It turned out that Harry and Hermione were not the only students to stay at Hogwarts for the Christmas break, but it was a near thing. When they turned up for dinner in the great hall that night, the long tables were completely empty except for the staff table at the head of the room, and Professor McGonagall motioned for them to come up when she noticed them loitering in the back.

"Hardly enough of us to even warrant setting this table," she said as she motioned them towards two seats opposite her, "but the Headmaster likes a bit of camaraderie at the holidays."

Dumbledore raised his glass at McGonagall in acknowledgement and smiled at Harry and Hermione. Down the table a little way past Professor McGonagall sat a terrified looking second or third year Slytherin girl that neither of them knew, a couple of older Slytherin boys, and two Ravenclaw seventh years, one of whom Harry recognized as one of their beaters. Professors Flitwick and Sinistra were sitting with them, trying to engage the students in conversation with varying degrees of success. On Dumbledore's other side sat Professor Lindell, her head bent over a book next to her plate.

Harry began dishing food onto his plate when he heard the sound of a door. Off to the side of the hall through a small door that Harry knew led into a sort of waiting room, strode Professor Snape. His expression turned, if it were possible, even darker than usual upon seeing the students and professors sitting together at one table. Harry smirked very slightly to himself, imagining the war Snape must be fighting with himself as to whether or not he could conceivably turn and flee back to his own rooms.

He approached the table, nodding disdainfully at the Slytherins and at Professor Flitwick who waved at him genially. There were no more seats at that end of the table. He proceeded past Harry and Hermione without so much as a glance, and found himself in a very delicate situation; he could either sit next to Harry or next to Professor Lindell. Harry found himself vehemently hoping he would choose the latter.

Instead, he pulled out a chair two places down from Harry and sank heavily into it. Harry saw Professor Lindell's eyes glance up at him ever so briefly from her book, but her placid expression did not change.

Professor McGonagall, however, pressed her lips together very tightly and scowled down the table at him. "Severus, if you're going to go out of your way to be rude, you might as well not come up for meals at all."

"An excellent suggestion," Professor Snape replied, making as though to stand. Suddenly, however, Professor Lindell snapped her book shut and swept it off the table as she stood in one fluid motion.

"Not to worry, Minerva," she said coolly, "I was just leaving. Good evening." Without ever looking him in the eye, she turned and strode quickly out the side door. Harry and Hermione exchanged a furtive look.

Without another word, Snape threw his chair backwards from the table and he too left the room.

"They really don't like one another, do they?" Hermione said softly. Professor McGonagall sniffed.

Professor Dumbledore said nothing; he was busily lining up a perfect row of green peas on the blade of his butter knife, apparently oblivious to the drama that had just played itself out at his elbow.

Professor Sprout showed up about that time, dusting her hands on her robes as she took up Professor Lindell's emptied place. After saying her hellos, she glanced all up and down the length of the table. "But," she said, brow furrowing, "where's Phillip?"

"We have not yet seen Mr. Fontaine, I'm afraid," Professor Dumbledore replied. Professor Sprout clucked her tongue and shook her head sadly as she helped herself to the peas.

"I was afraid of that. He's the only student from my house who stayed." She sighed heavily. "I think he's having trouble fitting in here. Doesn't seem to have made many friends, even in his own house." She glanced up at Harry across the table. "I was rather hoping the holidays would be a good chance for him to become better acquainted with you in particular, Mr. Potter. The two of you have a lot in common."

Harry smiled a bit feebly. He didn't think he'd spoken more than two words to Phillippe Fontaine all year. The boy was quiet and unassuming, and tended to blend into the background like a chameleon. He didn't answer questions in lessons, but he didn't get into trouble either. In fact, Harry probably wouldn't even have known who he was if not for that first day in potions when he'd walked in late. He wondered what Professor Sprout thought that he and Phillippe might have in common.

"Tell me, Harry," Professor Dumbledore said suddenly, "how are your lessons with Professor Lindell progressing? She informs me that you seem to have an uncanny natural aptitude for the subjects."

"Well, sir," Harry replied. A dozen things passed through his mind that he could say about Snape not noticing his talent, about Snape being a poor teacher, about Snape -- but then he recalled his conversation with Remus. "Professor Lindell is an excellent teacher," he said instead.

"She should be," Professor McGonagall said. "Top of her class, if I remember correctly. Good at everything, that girl was. Potions, charms, transfigurations. She went for more N.E.W.T.s than any other student I've ever taught, present company not excluded." Harry glanced at Hermione, who looked very impressed.

"It's no wonder she wanted to be a scriptionist," Hermione commented.

"As I recall," Professor McGonagall said thoughtfully, with a pointed glance at Harry, "that wasn't her first choice. She wanted to be an Auror."

Professor Dumbledore suddenly began to cough violently, startling everyone. Professor McGonagall had to slap him hard on the back several times before he recovered himself.

"Ah," he said, taking a sip of water. "Thank you, Minerva. A pea escaped down the wrong hatch, I'm afraid."

Harry frowned, thinking. Although Professor Lindell was certainly a formidable witch, he had trouble picturing her standing between Tonks and Kingsley in an Auror's robes. She seemed too delicate and elegant for that sort of work. He wanted desperately to ask more questions about Professor Lindell, but Professor Dumbledore had started reminiscing about a time when he'd choked on a peanut and Hagrid had broken three of his ribs doing the Heimlich Maneuver.

When the last crumbs of gingerbread disappeared from the table and a steaming urn of coffee took their place, after the other students had returned to their towers, Harry and Hermione said goodnight to their professors and headed out of the hall. Just outside the door, Hermione stopped to tie her shoelaces, when Harry heard something that caught his attention.

"...It's no wonder really, I suppose," Professor Sinestra was saying. "After what happened to her sister she was fixated on revenge."

Hermione stood to go, but Harry caught her arm, shushing her as he listened to the voices echoing out of the cavernous space.

"Poor dear," replied the tiny voice of professor Flitwick. "But revenge? That seems very unlike Demetria."

"Penny died when she was very young," sighed McGonagall. "An accident was the official report, but Demetria made no secret of the fact that she believed her sister had been murdered and--"

Professor McGonagall stopped abruptly as Dumbledore coughed again. Harry pulled a face; the headmaster must know they were outside. Quickly, he and Hermione darted away towards the stairs.

"What do you suppose that was all about?" Harry asked quietly as he and Hermione entered Gryffindor Tower. "What do you think happened to Professor Lindell's sister? Why didn't she become an Auror? Dumbledore clearly didn't want us to know..."

Hermione shrugged. "Well can you blame him, Harry? We have something of a reputation for being nosy. He was probably worried we'd go to Professor Lindell and demand that she tell us all about it."

Harry frowned. "I'm not nosy," he said petulantly as they climbed through the portrait hole into the cold, dark common room. "I'm inquisitive, that's all."

Hermione shook her head. "Inquisitive like a fox."

Late that night, Harry started awake in the lonely darkness of the empty tower. "They're coming!" he shouted aloud, but as soon as the words left his lips, he found he could not remember who was coming or why he had thought it. He passed a hand over his eyes, grateful that the dormitory was empty and that there would be no awkward questions as he cast about in his mind trying desperately to find a lingering strand of the dream that had woken him.

Beside him on the bed, something moved.

Harry stiffened, suddenly acutely aware of the warm weight lying next to him on top of the duvet. His heart began to pound in his ears and he held his breath. All he heard, however, was a great snuffling sigh.

Tentatively, Harry put his hand out in the darkness towards the thing on the bed and his fingers met a tangle of warm, coarse fur. Harry breathed a sigh of relief and allowed himself to slip back into the warm pocket of sleep he had only just left, feeling comfortable and safe with Padfoot curled against his hip.

The next morning, Harry awoke to a sharp knock on the door. He sat up, patting the side of his bed. He felt like he was missing something. Another knock interrupted his thoughts and he found he couldn't remember what ought to be there.

"Who is it?" he called, feeling around on his bedside table for his glasses.

"It's me!" Hermione called shrilly. "Who else would it be? Are you decent?"

"Just a minute!" Harry hurried out of bed and grabbed a jumper from his open trunk, pulling it on quickly over his pajama bottoms. "Yeah!" he called. "Come in!"

Hermione came rushing into the room, fully dressed, a stack of books filling her arms. She quickly closed the door with her foot, dumped the books on the end of Ron's bed, and rushed over to stoke the fire.

"It's freezing out there!" she squealed, holding her hands in front of the stove and rubbing them together for warmth.

"What's all this, then?" Harry asked, looking over the pile of books Hermione had brought with her. They had titles like, *A Beginner's Guide to Healing Charms*, *Be Prepared! Practical First Aid for Witches and Wizards of All Ages*, and *A Healer's Guide to Home Safety*.

"It's our holiday project!" Hermione said enthusiastically. "We're going to start learning basic healing spells to teach to the DA."

"We are?" Harry replied, doubtfully. He began digging through his trunk for a clean pair of trousers.

"I've already started reading *A Beginner's Guide to Healing Charms*, and there are quite a few things in there that could be very useful, especially if--" She stopped abruptly and Harry turned to look at her.

"Especially if what?" he asked.

She was busy stacking her books and papers neatly again, her back turned to him. "Well, you know..." she said hesitantly. "If we had to be in a battle again, like... like last year..."

"That's not going to happen," Harry said forcefully. Hermione glanced up at him at last. "I won't let it."

"Then what are we doing all this for?" Hermione demanded.

"I don't know! The healing charms were your idea--"

"Not the healing charms!" Hermione composed herself, then sighed and sat down on the end of Ron's bed. "What are we doing the DA for if you don't think we're going to be in another battle?" she asked pointedly.

"So that you can learn to protect yourselves," Harry said vehemently, "not so you can fight. What happened at the Ministry was a huge mistake, and I'm not going to let any of you get into a battle like that again."

"Harry," Hermione said, eyes searching his, "It's not always going to be up to you."

Harry frowned at her. A little voice inside his head told him that she was right, but he didn't want to admit it. Unhappily, he turned back to his trunk and started rummaging again.

The image of a streak of purple light hitting Hermione blazed in his mind. He remembered her expression of surprise as she began to fall, felt his own muscles tense as he tried to reach her. Harry blinked hard and shook his head. It didn't matter what Hermione said; he would never put his friends in danger like that again.

"Anyway," Hermione said hesitantly, "I thought you and I could start working out which charms we want to learn. You know, which ones would be the most useful and the easiest to master and all that."

Harry took a deep breath and nodded, turning to smile at her. "You're right," he said. "It's a grand idea. But can it wait until after breakfast?"

Hermione smiled, relieved.

The winter cold, which had been so late in coming, decided to assert itself with such frigid temperatures that everyone in the castle was reluctant to wander about. Professor McGonagall had informed them only a few days into the holiday that, while Christmas tea would still be served in the Great Hall, she had arranged for the rest of their meals to be sent up to the tower; the Great Hall was too large to heat for so few people.

The change in weather might have been welcome if it had been accompanied by thick drifts of snow around the castle, but the previous weeks' rains suddenly dried up, and while the skies turned slate grey and the wind howled around corners, the ground remained brittle, brown, and frozen. So, rather than spending their days out of doors, Harry and Hermione cloistered themselves in the boys' dormitory -- much smaller and easier to keep warm than the cavernous common room -- and read about healing charms. It was Christmas Eve and Hermione was, as usual, curled up on Ron's bed, reading, while Harry composed a Christmas letter to Remus.

"How do you spell, 'magnanimous'?" Harry asked, propping himself up on one elbow from the end of his bed.

"Just like it sounds," Hermione said without looking up from her reading. "Why? What are you being magnanimous about?"

Harry smiled. "I'm telling Remus that I'm very put out he decided not to show up in this country for Christmas, but that I'm feeling magnanimous and sending him his Christmas present anyway."

Hermione snorted and shook her head. "What did you get him?"

"A book." Harry felt himself blush slightly. "And socks."

Hermione looked up. "Socks?"

"Well, his have got holes in them. All of them. I noticed when it was Ron and my turn to do the wash over the summer. So I got him some nice wool ones." He yanked the lid off the box next to him. "They're part cashmere, so they're really soft, and they've got these Everlast charms on them so they won't shrink or stretch, get holes or any of that."

Hermione smiled at him as he held up a pair of soft, grey socks for her inspection. "They're lovely," she assured him. "I'm sure he'll like them."

Harry nodded to himself, carefully rolled the socks up, and placed them back in the box.

Hermione yawned and placed a bookmark in her book. "It's getting late," she observed. "I ought to go to bed." She smiled at him. "Want to be awake in plenty of time for presents, after all." Harry grinned as he picked up his quill to continue writing, but before he could answer, he heard an odd tapping noise. Hermione heard it too, and they both started looking around.

"At the window!" Hermione exclaimed, pointing. Harry got off of his bed and went over to the window, opening it wide enough for a large, brown, unfamiliar owl to flutter in out of the wind.

"Ooooo!" Hermione shivered. "Close it quick!" Harry obliged and turned to see what the owl had brought him, but it had fluttered over and landed next to Hermione on the bed.

"What is it?" Harry asked. Hermione pulled a roll of parchment off the owl's leg, and the bird took off, heading back towards Harry. He only managed to get the window open just in time, slammed it shut behind the bird, and went to sit next to Hermione.

"Special edition," Hermione said, her eyes already darting back and forth across the page. Harry glanced over her shoulder and gasped at what he saw there.

A large photograph, taking up the top half of the front page, showed five dementors gliding down the high street in Hogsmeade.

"That's Zonko's!" Harry exclaimed as the creatures passed the familiar shop front. One of the dementors paused, apparently to peer with its hidden eyes through a shop's front window.

"This is the second time dementors have been spotted in Hogsmeade," Hermione said, still reading furiously. "And apparently -- oh my god..."

"What?" Harry demanded, leaning in closer, trying to read over her shoulder.

"They got someone," Hermione whispered. "A Muggle-born witch named Janina Podgurski."

"What do you mean, they got her?" Harry asked, still trying to see around Hermione's head.

"While the Ministry still refuses to confirm that the witch in question was the victim of a Kiss," Hermione began to read, "witnesses say that at least two dementors entered Miss Podgurski's home, and when a party entered the home to try to drive the dementors away, they found Miss

Podgurski in a catatonic state, completely unresponsive to any external stimuli." Harry felt Hermione shiver next to him.

"This happened today," she said. "Just a few hours ago." She glanced up at the window, eyes wide. "They might still be out there."

"Well, you don't have to worry about them," Harry said quickly. "You can do a Patronus, remember?"

Hermione gave him a skeptical look. "Of course I can," she said, "in broad daylight in a room full of my friends, no problem, but faced with a real dementor, in the middle of the night, all alone?" She shuddered again, passing him the newspaper. "I hate those things."

"Me too," Harry agreed, stealing a look at the darkened window in spite of himself. "But I don't think they're likely to come floating in through your bedroom window, if that's what you're worried about."

"Of course not," Hermione said quietly. He glanced over at her. She had drawn the duvet up around her shoulders. Her chin was tucked against her chest, only her eyes visible under the bushy cloud of her hair. "But there's nothing about Hogwarts keeping them out either, is there? Other than Professor Dumbledore, I mean."

Harry shrugged, unsure of whether or not he should confirm Hermione's fears. But she was right; as far as he knew, there wasn't anything to prevent a dementor from floating anywhere it wanted, even onto the Hogwarts grounds.

"I should go to bed," Hermione said, but she didn't move. "I'm just being silly, scaring myself like this." Harry nodded, suddenly not at all looking forward to the prospect of sleeping in an empty dormitory, himself.

"You could... You could stay here, if you wanted," he suggested, trying to make it sound as light as possible. "In Ron's bed, I mean," he added quickly. "I'm sure he wouldn't mind. You know, just in case... or whatever."

Hermione began to nod slowly, then she stopped. "But that's pretty explicitly against the rules, Harry," she said. "Girls are *not* allowed to sleep in the boys' dormitory."

"Not even when there are dementors on the loose?" Harry countered. Hermione gave him a dubious look. "Besides," he added, "it's not like McGonagall does bed checks, and I don't think we've broken nearly enough rules this year. We need to start catching up."

Hermione smiled a little at that. "And it will be awfully cold in my room," she said thoughtfully. "I haven't stoked the fire all afternoon."

"Right," Harry said.

"Shall I put the lights out?" Hermione asked. They looked at one another for a long moment. Outside, the wind howled maliciously.

"Better not," Harry said at last. "You know, just in case."

"Right," Hermione answered. "Just in case."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE: A Very Weasley Christmas

Harry woke the next morning feeling warm and comfortable. He lay for a while staring off into the darkness and letting his mind wander, trying to recall the dreams that were stubbornly eluding him. After a few moments, he remembered that it was Christmas morning, and that there would be a pile of presents waiting for him at the foot of his bed. He lay in bed for another minute, just thinking, and smiled slightly wondering what he would get from Ron and Hermione, anticipating the

lumpy package with a new jumper in it from Mrs. Weasley, the requisite tin of treacle fudge from Hagrid, maybe even a letter from Remus....

He heard a yawn from across the room and remembered with a little jolt that Hermione was there. Parting his bed curtains slightly, he fished around for his glasses, and then poked his head out. She was sitting on the edge of Ron's bed, rubbing her eyes. Harry had to quickly stifle a laugh as he stared at the ridiculous bird's nest her hair had become.

"Morning," he said, when he had recovered enough to speak.

"I was wondering if you were up," she said sleepily. "Look. McGonagall's sent us breakfast." She pointed to the middle of the room where an ancient looking tea trolley was sitting near the stove. Both of its shelves were heavily laden with breakfast goodies like warm sticky buns, chocolate croissants, bacon and toast, and a steaming silver tea service.

Harry climbed out of bed to go and examine the bounty, grabbing a bun and taking a huge bite out of it as he lifted the covers off of various plates and dishes.

"What do you want?" he asked, turning to look at Hermione, but she was staring at him in wide eyed horror.

"She knows," Hermione whispered, eyes darting furtively around the room.

"Who knows what now?" Harry asked, still munching.

"McGonagall!" Hermione hissed. "If she sent breakfast for two people to your room, then she KNOWS that I'm here!"

Harry paused to think about that. "Maybe," he said at last, "but she did send us breakfast, not howlers or a plague of locusts or anything like that, so I bet she understands. Bacon?"

Hermione stared at him. "How can you be so glib?" she asked in a more normal tone of voice.

Harry shrugged. "It's a gift. Besides, it's Christmas!" He gestured grandly at the foot of his bed. Only then did he notice that where there ought to have been a modest but entirely satisfying pile of presents, there was nothing but a single box lying on the bare floor. Hermione had no presents whatsoever.

"That doesn't seem right," Harry said, walking over to examine his lone, and rather minuscule, present. "Where are yours?"

Hermione hung over the end of the bed and checked underneath it. "Maybe they're in my room," she said. Suddenly, her expression brightened considerably. "Maybe McGonagall *doesn't* know I'm here; she just guessed that we'd be up here for breakfast! I'll be right back." Jumping off the bed, she padded in stocking-clad feet out of the room.

Harry frowned as he scooped up the little box. It was red and tied with a large creamy colored ribbon with a little scrap of parchment tucked underneath it. Shoving the rest of his bun into his mouth, Harry removed the tag to read it.

*To: Harry Potter
From: Professor D. Lindell
I finally found a good one for you. Happy Christmas.*

A good one what? Harry wondered as he untied the bow and lifted the lid off of the box. Hermione burst into the room. She had tied her unruly hair back into a pony tail and donned her red flannel dressing gown.

"They're not there!" she said unhappily. "There's nothing in my room either. There's something weird going on." She crossed her arms sullenly and plopped down on the end of Ron's bed. "What's that you've got there?" she asked.

"A box," Harry replied.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Well, I can see that. What's inside the box?"

"No," Harry said, lifting the gift from its packaging. "I mean, I think it's a box." In his hand he held a small, dark wood cube covered in raised symbols and letters. He looked at it closely, turning it slowly in his hand, but couldn't find a latch, a hinge, or any way inside. "Or maybe not..." he said, frowning at it curiously.

"Who's it from?" Hermione asked, getting up to pour herself a cup of tea from the breakfast service.

"Professor Lindell," Harry replied, still examining the cube intently. "She said she 'finally found'--"

"Harry!"

Harry glanced up. Hermione was holding up a large box wrapped in garish Christmas paper -- a pattern of green house elves and red stockings.

"It was on the trolley," Hermione said, pointing to the bottom shelf as she brought the package over and sat next to him, "and it's addressed to both of us."

"That's odd," Harry said, looking at the card, which clearly said *For Harry Potter and Hermione Granger* but did not include the name of the sender.

"Well, let's open it," Hermione said, tugging at the bright green yarn tied in a bow. Harry shrugged, and together they tore the paper off. Hermione lifted the lid and took out a folded piece of parchment. Beneath it sat a rusty and badly dented kettle.

"What in the world?" she said, unfolding the parchment. Harry leaned over to read it as well, setting the odd package on the bed.

Dear Harry and Hermione,

*It's sad to be alone on Christmas day,
Without your family and your loved ones near.
We thought we'd try to brighten up your day
And give you both some needed Christmas cheer.
The Headmaster said it would be okay
For us to send this special gift for two.
Just touch the kettle to be on your way,
'Cause all of us are waiting here for you!*

*Love,
The Weasleys*

"It's a portkey!" Harry exclaimed. "A portkey to the Burrow!"

Hermione frowned at the parchment suspiciously. "But why wouldn't they tell us if they were going to send for us?"

Harry shrugged. "It was probably meant to be a surprise," he replied. Hermione was still looking at the kettle as though she expected it to sprout fangs and try to bite them at any moment.

"Don't you want to go to the Burrow?" Harry asked insistently.

"Of course I do!" Hermione scoffed. "Maybe we could just floo them first and make sure..."

"Got any floo powder?" Harry asked pointedly. Hermione frowned at him. "Oh stop being such a wet blanket, Hermione!" he cried, exasperated. "It's Christmas!"

"And you have an unfortunate history with portkeys," Hermione countered.

Harry huffed, crossing his arms across his chest. "Fine. We won't go. We'll stay here and be miserable with no presents and nothing but pain au chocolat to comfort us."

"Oh, stop whining," Hermione sighed, replacing the lid on the box. "I'm going to go get dressed and throw a few things in a bag, and then we'll go, OK?" Before Harry could answer, she was up, had grabbed a croissant from the trolley, and dashed out of the door.

Rolling his eyes, Harry began to dress and started searching for some clean clothes to toss into his book bag. He was scrounging around for a matching pair of socks when Hermione reappeared, ready to go. She munched thoughtfully on a piece of bacon as Harry finished packing.

He glanced around to see if he'd forgotten anything and, on a whim, stuffed Professor Lindell's gift in on top of his clothes.

"Ready?" Hermione asked, removing the lid from the kettle-box once more.

"Ready."

"Erm..."

"What?"

"Wands out, do you reckon?"

Harry rolled his eyes again. "Fine."

Shouldering their bags and clutching their wands, they reached in together and firmly grasped the wretched old kettle. With a familiar yank and a dizzying swirl, they were on their way.

When the spinning stopped and Harry opened his eyes, he was immediately tackled to the ground.

"HARRY!" Ron shouted, very nearly elbowing Harry in the face in his exuberance. "You're here! What are you doing here? How did you get here?" He grinned wildly. "Nay mind! I don't care!"

"Nice to see you too, Ron," Hermione said, brushing imaginary specks of dust off of her jumper. Ron glanced over at her, leapt to his feet, and pulled her into a bone crushing hug. Hermione's eyes bulged and she made a squeaking noise.

Harry laughed.

"Harry!"

"What are you doing on the floor?"

Harry was pulled to his feet suddenly by both of the twins, dressed in matching hand-knit purple jumpers with three W's emblazoned across the front in gold.

"Good to see you, mate!" Fred (or possibly George) cried clapping Harry soundly on the back. "We were wondering when you were going to turn up!"

"Yeah," George (Fred?) said with a huge grin. "It just didn't feel like Christmas without you!"

Ginny appeared from the kitchen, bouncing with excitement as she hugged Hermione. "But why didn't you tell us you were coming?" she squealed. "It would have saved me a lot of moping this last week."

"We didn't know," Hermione protested. "We just woke up this morning and found a portkey with our names on it."

Harry looked around and spotted Mr. and Mrs. Weasley standing in the kitchen doorway with their arms around each other. Mr. Weasley was beaming proudly at them all, and Mrs. Weasley was dabbing the corner of her eyes with her apron.

"Well, we thought we'd give you all a bit of a surprise," Mr. Weasley said. "So, I arranged everything with Dumbledore and got the portkeys all set up..."

"Portkeys?" Hermione repeated. "But there was only -- eeeeeee!"

Her protestations were cut off by an inhuman shriek as she saw two more people appear behind Mr. and Mrs. Weasley.

"Mummy! Dad!" Hermione squealed, rushing forward. The Grangers became instantly entangled in a very bushy-haired three-way hug. Fred, George, and Ginny began doing a happy dance around them.

"Happy Christmas, Hermione," Mr. Weasley said, sporting an enormous grin.

"Christmas is no time to be away from your family," Mrs. Weasley explained as Hermione broke away from her parents long enough to smother her with a hug.

"That's right," Mr. Weasley said, coming over to stand next to Harry and Ron. "Everyone belongs with their family at Christmas." He put a hand on Harry's shoulder.

"Thanks, Mr. Weasley," Harry said.

"It was a good surprise, wasn't it?" Mr. Weasley replied, "I've never seen Ron so gloomy as when he and Ginny got off that train all alone."

Ron was grinning lopsidedly at his dad. "You had me all convinced that you'd just 'forgotten' to invite Harry along!" He protested. He glanced at Harry. "Who knew my parents could be so sneaky?" Harry grinned.

"Happy Christmas, Ron," Mr. Weasley replied with a wink.

The Burrow was the incarnation of Christmas spirit that day. The very air was filled with it; pine sap and cinnamon, warm fires, eggnog, jingling bells, and laughter. After the silence and solitude of the empty Gryffindor Tower, the confused cacophony was music to Harry's ears.

One entire wall of the living room was taken up with one of the largest Christmas trees Harry had ever seen. Or perhaps it only seemed huge because it dominated the room. Either way, it was a magnificent sight, hung all around with what looked like hand-made ornaments from the Weasley children's childhoods, floating candles, real snow and shining icicles, little red-breasted robins that chirped and flapped their wings, and tiny furry squirrels that darted from branch to branch, watching Harry with their bead black eyes and nibbling on the holly and garlands of cranberries. Harry put his finger out to touch a green Christmas tree ornament cut from felt with a tiny photo on it of the twins at about seven or eight years old, each with a giant bow stuck on his head.

Feeling a little dazed -- partially from all the excitement, and partially from being knocked about the head by Ron -- Harry followed the others into the warm, friendly kitchen of the Burrow.

"Oy!" Ron said grabbing him by the arm and wrenching him to one side. "Watch out for the mistletoe." He pointed to the lintel of the doorway where an innocent looking bundle of greenery

had been hung from a bit of red yarn. "Fred and George's idea," Ron explained. "If you stand under it for more than a second or two, it keeps you there until you get a kiss. They put it up when Bill brought his girlfriend Fleur to dinner the other night." He smirked a bit. "Fred got himself stuck on purpose, hoping for a kiss from Fleur, only he got one from Bill instead."

Over the enormous hearth in the kitchen hung a row of matching red stockings in decreasing sizes, each with an initial knitted into it. The one with the 'A' was the biggest, hanging almost all the way down to the floor, and the rest were progressively smaller, all the way down to the littlest 'G.'

"Those are for later, dear," Mrs. Weasley said, seeing Harry staring at the stockings. "Have you had breakfast? Yes? Good. Why don't you help the boys clear the table?"

Harry followed Fred, George, and Ron over to the sink where they were making tall stacks of plates and cups. Harry grabbed a few errant glasses and plunged them into the dishwater. Mrs. Granger was watching the magical scrubbing brush with an expression of awe. Her face resembled Hermione's very much, but her hair was sleek and long and threaded with a few silver strands. It was obvious from Mr. Granger's bushy beard where Hermione had inherited her hair, although the top of his own head was completely bald and very shiny.

Suddenly there was a clattering of jingle bells from the front of the house. "Oy! I smell gingerbread!"

"Bill!" Ginny squealed, rushing to greet her eldest brother. George hopped up to follow her, poking his head around the doorframe. He reappeared a moment later looking crestfallen.

"Just Bill," he said, sounding disappointed.

"Fleur's visiting her family in France," Ron reminded him.

Before long, Charlie arrived as well, carrying an enormous turkey. "Over here, over here!" Mrs. Weasley cried, directing Charlie, who could barely see around the gargantuan bird. "Just put it in the oven -- there!"

"But that will take forever to cook, won't it?" Mrs. Granger asked, looking at the turkey thoughtfully.

Mrs. Weasley smiled knowingly at her. "Not if we help it along a bit..." Harry saw Mrs. Granger's eyes go wide as she watched Mrs. Weasley poking the turkey with her wand.

"What about the Statute of Secrecy and all that?" Harry asked quietly, drawing Hermione away from her parents a bit.

"That doesn't apply to immediate family members," Hermione said. "There's a whole subsection dedicated to the use of magic around Muggles who already know about the wizard world." Hermione glanced around furtively. "By the way, Harry," she whispered, "please don't say anything about the dementors to my parents. They won't understand, and it'll just frighten them, OK?"

Before Harry could answer, he heard the jingle of the bells over the front door again. Everyone grew silent. Harry glanced around, counting red heads, and wondering who was missing.

"Hullo? Er... Hullo? Is anyone home?"

"PERCY!" Mrs. Weasley cried racing for the front room. Harry, Ron, and Hermione exchanged looks and then, in unison, turned to the twins who were scowling blackly. Bill, however, was already on it.

"Not a *word*, you two," he said, grabbing both of his younger brothers by the scruffs of their necks. "If you ruin this for Mum, I'll see that you look like you've been testing out those Nosebleed Nougats on each other again, right?"

"Right!" George yelped.

"What do you take us for?" Fred asked, rubbing the back of his neck when Bill released him. "A couple of insensitive gimps?"

"Just so long as we're clear," Bill said quietly as Mrs. Weasley ushered Percy into the kitchen, fawning over him every step of the way. Percy, for his part, looked highly embarrassed, but Harry was pleased to see that, under his robes, Percy was wearing one of Mrs. Weasley's jumpers.

"Richard, this is our son, Percy," Mr. Weasley was saying, steering Percy over towards Mr. Granger who was laughing and looking hopeless.

"I'm going to need a scoreboard to keep track of you all!" he said. "OK, you're Percy, and that's Charlie, and you're..."

"George," Fred said helpfully.

"Right, you're George, so that makes you Fred," Mr. Granger said, pointing at George, "and the bloke with the ponytail is Bill -- yes? Bill?"

"That's right," Hermione said encouragingly.

"And you," Mr. Granger said, wrapping an arm around Ron's shoulders, "are Ron. Couldn't forget you, could I? Not the way our Hermione goes on about you." He chuckled good-naturedly as Ron and Hermione both blushed deeply.

"And Harry, Dad," Hermione said quickly. "You remember Harry, from this summer?"

"Of course we remember Harry," Mrs. Granger said, taking a seat next to her husband.

Harry smiled, trying to remember if he'd ever properly thanked them for the birthday cake, when he heard what sounded like a hailstorm knocking at the back door.

"What in the -- who could that be?" Mrs. Weasley asked as she left the potatoes chopping themselves by the sink.

Charlie was nearest, and so he answered the door. At first, Harry thought it was some sort of prank, as he couldn't see anyone there. Then Mrs. Weasley groaned and Harry heard a sound uncannily like a pitch pipe.

"I keep hoping they'll forget one year..." Mrs. Weasley began, but she was drowned out by a chorus of very tiny voices:

"We wish you a merry Christmas, we wish you a merry Christmas, we wish you a merry Christmas and a happy new year!"

Harry crept forward to peer around Charlie out onto the back step where dozens of ugly greenish brown garden gnomes stood ranged across the threshold.

"Mum!" Charlie called. "Where's the gnome pudding?"

"Right by the door, where it always is," Mrs. Weasley replied, her attention once again on her chopping vegetables.

"Gnome pudding?" Mrs. Granger repeated, looking distressed.

"Now bring us some figgy pudding, now bring us some figgy pudding, now bring us some figgy pudding, and bring it RIGHT HERE!"

"Every year it's the same thing," Fred complained, grabbing a large tin from the shelf near the door.

"You'd think they'd learn a new song once in a while," George added. "Or at least come up with something better to ask for than figgy pudding."

Harry gapped at them. "You mean they actually want figgy pudding?"

"We won't go until we get some, we won't go until we get some, we won't go until we get some so bring some RIGHT HERE!"

"Here!" Charlie shouted, grabbing a handful out of the tin and chucking it at the assembled gnomes. The clod of preserved fruits and brandy hit one of them smack in the face, and several others began swarming around it, going for the pudding.

"Good shot, Charlie," George said as he happily hurled another clod out the door, this time a little further away. The gnomes began to break ranks, some still singing, badly out of key with the others.

"Here, Harry," Fred said, pressing a handful of sticky pudding into Harry's hands. "It's a Weasley family tradition."

Harry grinned broadly and tossed the goop out into the yard where quite a few gnomes scurried out after it. He turned to see Mr. Granger watching him curiously.

"What in blue blazes are those things?"

Things never stopped moving in the kitchen of the Burrow, resulting in a barely contained chaos, like a cauldron perpetually on the verge of boiling over. Everyone wanted to help Mrs. Weasley, so various people were set to various tasks like peeling potatoes, shaping dough into rolls, chopping onions, and the like. At one point, Mr. Weasley brandished an extremely large cleaver, enthusiastically claiming that he was going to carve the turkey "the Muggle way," and quickly began asking the Grangers exactly how one went about doing that.

After Mrs. Weasley announced that it was time for the stockings and gifts, all hell broke loose. Each of the Weasley children scrabbled enthusiastically for the fireplace. Fred reached the mantel first and seemed to be doing his level best to block the way for as many of his siblings as possible. Percy stood behind him, hands on hips, looking as though he were having a difficult time not saying something rude. He was spared the moral quandary when Bill gave Fred a great shove and sent him sprawling to the floor. Mrs. Weasley kept shouting things at them, though for the most part her voice was drowned by the happy din -- a feat in and of itself. Mr. and Mrs. Granger disappeared for a moment and then returned with ordinary shopping bags filled with gifts which they began pressing on Hermione.

Harry stood back, content to watch the mayhem. Just then, Mrs. Weasley caught his attention.

"Well go on, dear," she said kindly. "Don't you want to open your stocking?" Harry frowned at her, then looked over at the mantel. There, between the places where Ron and Ginny's stockings had hung was another red stocking with a white 'H' knitted into it. He hadn't even noticed it amongst the others before. Mouth gaping, he glanced back at Mrs. Weasley who was smiling fondly at him.

Solemnly, Harry walked over to the fireplace and removed his stocking from its hook. It was heavy and practically overflowing. He turned back to Mr. and Mrs. Weasley.

"You didn't have to..." he started.

"Oh just dig in, Harry," George said with a grin. "It's what we all do."

Harry sat down on the floor between Ron and Charlie, who were already half way through the contents of their stockings.

"Ah, get in!" Ron exclaimed pulling an enormous sack marked 'Zonkos' out of his stocking. Harry couldn't quite see how it had ever fit into the sock in the first place. "Thanks, lads!" Ron cried, waving the bag at Fred and George.

"You're buying gifts from the competition?" Bill asked.

"Market research," Fred replied airily, unwrapping an enormous bar of Honeydukes' chocolate from Ron.

"What's all this then?" Percy asked suddenly. He was frowning and holding up a large black rock.

"Must've been a naughty boy, Perce," George replied, sniggering. "Father Christmas has gone and left you a stocking full of coal!"

"FRED!" Mrs. Weasley roared.

"Why do you always assume it was me?" Fred asked innocently. His mother glared at him and he paled slightly under her gaze.

"Yes, all right," he sighed. "No need to get your knickers in a twist, Percy." He pulled his wand out and waved it in Percy's direction, turning the coal in his hand into a book. Percy was still pouting but looked slightly mollified to realize that the rest of his gifts had all been put right as well.

It didn't take Harry long to figure out that the stockings had been modified by the same kind of charm that Mr. Weasley had used on his car; they were much bigger on the inside than they looked. He pulled out a new Weasley jumper, done in a dark heather green, and a large tin of baked treats from Mr. and Mrs. Weasley; a batch of peanut brittle from Hagrid that seemed harder than diamonds; a book entitled *Secrets of the Aurors: Auror Practices and Procedures Revealed!* from Ron; and an enormous box of assorted chocolates from Ginny.

Near the bottom, Harry found a box filled with strange delicacies like a packet of biscuits labeled "OREOS," colorful bags of crisps, a bag of chocolates called "Kisses," and a small roll of paper tied with a red satin ribbon. Carefully untying the bow, he unrolled the papers and found himself staring down at several pages of sheet music, hand written, with the title "Phoenix Song," written across the top. At the bottom was a small, tidy post script.

*Solo Composition for Violin, composed by Gwendolyn L. Griffiths
Dedicated to Harry Potter, for being an inspiration.*

"What's that?" Ron asked, peering over his shoulder.

"Nothing," Harry replied quickly, re-rolling the pages tightly. "Gwyn sent me loads of American stuff -- look!"

"What in Merlin's name--"

Harry glanced over, following Ron's shocked expression, and saw Mr. Weasley holding up a truly horrible pair of boxer shorts. They were red and green plaid with Father Christmas hats printed on them and real silver jingle bells sewed on each and every hat. Mr. Weasley shook them experimentally and they made a horrible racket.

"Er... Thank you, boys..." he said uncertainly. Fred and George grinned.

"We thought you'd like 'em," George said proudly.

"We went all over London looking for just the thing for you," Fred added. "Traditional Muggle Christmas gift, those are." At that, his father's face lit up happily.

"Really? Wow..."

Harry glanced over at Mr. and Mrs. Granger who were frowning uncertainly at the twins, and at Hermione who was giggling behind her hand.

"Did you hear that, Molly? Muggle Christmas tradition! Thanks boys!"

"Thank you, Harry!" Hermione called from the other side of the room, holding up the enormous tome of illustrated and animated anatomy he'd ordered for her. Harry felt slightly relieved; he had been wondering whether or not his presents for the others had made the trip to the Burrow with him, but apparently the Weasleys had thought of everything.

"Have you opened mine?" Hermione asked.

Digging around in the stocking once again, Harry produced a package with a tag saying that it was from Hermione. Ron found he had an almost identical package and they opened them together.

Inside each was a pair of knitted, black, fingerless gloves with a scarlet and a gold pattern around the wrists.

"They're for Quidditch," Hermione explained, coming to sit with them. "I made them myself. I'm getting loads better, don't you think?"

"Wow," Harry said, trying his on for size. It fit perfectly. "I'll say."

"Speaking of Quidditch..." Ron said suddenly, getting up and heading for the closet. He returned a moment later carrying a large, badly wrapped object.

"This is from me," he said, handing it to Hermione.

"And me!" Ginny interjected. Ron rolled his eyes.

"And Ginny," he amended.

Hermione, looking pleasantly perplexed, began tearing off the paper while Ginny and Ron glared at each other.

"Oh my goodness!" Hermione exclaimed, staring at the package in her lap. "It's a broom!"

"It's my old broom," Ginny said with a grin. "Ron sent it off to have it refurbished and everything, so now it's good as new!"

"Ron!" Hermione said, staring from the broom in her lap up to Ron. "That must have been really expensive. You shouldn't have gone to so much trouble!"

"It was less trouble than knitting a pair of gloves," Ron said with a shrug. "And besides, I reckon it's time you had a proper flying lesson. We'll get you over that fear of heights in no time, you'll see!"

Harry caught Hermione's slightly panicked look and grinned.

"Ewwwww!" Ginny yelled suddenly, leaping up off the floor and backing away from her stocking. She put her fists on her hips and stared around at each of her brothers. "All right!" she roared. "Who thought it would be funny to put something slimy in my stocking??" She turned and looked directly at Fred and George.

"Wasn't us," George said. "Didn't bring a thing that's slimy, though I could run back to the shop if you like."

"See," Fred added, "that's the trouble with being so almighty funny: we get blamed for pranks that weren't even ours to begin with." Ginny narrowed her eyes at him dangerously. "Honestly!" Fred said with a chuckle. "Coal is the extent of our stocking tampering this year."

Ginny seemed to believe them as she turned her glare towards Bill and Charlie. Ron reached over and grabbed her stocking and started poking around in it.

"Hey!" he said, drawing the slimy thing out. "It's Trevor!"

"Who?" Mrs. Granger asked warily, staring disdainfully down at the toad in Ron's hands.

"How did Trevor get in my stocking?" Ginny demanded.

"Must have come with us from Hogwarts somehow," Harry said, accepting the toad from Ron. "Neville was looking for him. You know how he's always disappearing."

Ginny looked like she didn't quite know whether or not to believe him.

"Right, that's it!" Mrs. Weasley announced. "Everyone clear your gifts out of the kitchen and help me get things ready for supper!"

That the meal managed to get assembled and on the table without any major mishaps despite the number of people "helping" was a magic that Harry couldn't even begin to fathom. Mrs. Weasley directed them all like an orchestra conductor.

The twins were levitating and juggling the hot rolls in mid air and then tossing them casually into the breadbaskets when Mrs. Weasley said, "Will someone please get the turkey out of the oven?"

"No problem, Mum," Fred replied, sending the last roll skittering into its place. He waved his wand casually towards the oven, and the door flew open.

"NO! Fred, not the turkey!" Mrs. Weasley screeched in horror. Everyone stopped to watch as Fred and George easily levitated the turkey out of the oven and over the end of the table.

"No faith," Fred scoffed as the turkey made a perfect three-point landing. "No faith at all..."

As they were finally sitting down to dinner, Harry heard another knock at the back door.

"Oh not again," Mrs. Weasley sighed. "Charlie, if they start singing again, just chuck the whole tin at them!"

Charlie grinned, bolting for the door and grabbing the gnome pudding tin on his way. When he opened the door, however, Harry didn't hear any singing, so he turned to look. Charlie was helping a man out of his shabby, threadbare overcoat as he stomped and rubbed his hands together. Harry frowned at the back of his head until he turned to face the gathered revelers.

"Remus!" Harry exclaimed, shooting up out of his chair.

"Sorry I'm late," Remus replied with a weak smile. Harry nearly tripped over his own feet trying to extricate himself from the tangle of people and mismatched chairs ranged around the Weasleys' kitchen table. Remus didn't look entirely well; his skin was pale and seemed slightly translucent, his eyes were not as bright as usual, and there were poorly hidden red welts peeking out over the top of his collar. Nevertheless, Harry didn't think he'd seen a more welcome sight in a very long time.

"I'll get another chair," Bill said, getting up from the table.

"He can have mine!" Harry called after him, yanking the chair out even further so that Remus could slip into it. Fred, George and Ginny scooted obligingly along the bench they were sharing and made

room for Harry on the end, next to Remus. Everyone was talking at once. Mrs. Weasley was loading up a plate with a giant's share of everything and clucking disapprovingly about how thin Remus was, Hermione was making introductions to her parents, Mr. Weasley was offering him a glass of wine while asking him about his trip, and the twins were peppering Harry with questions about where Remus had been and what he had been doing.

At the head of the table, Arthur stood and began wiggling his fingers and shaking out his arms expressively as he brandished the cleaver and large fork he had chosen for carving. Mrs. Weasley was watching him with an expression of unabashed terror; Mr. Granger was offering pointers.

"All right, it's the legs first, Arthur me lad. Then the wings, and then the -- are you sure you wouldn't like me to, er..."

"I've got it, I've got it," Mr. Weasley replied vaguely as he began tentatively poking the bird with his fork.

"Bill," Mrs. Weasley hissed as Mr. Weasley and Mr. Granger became distracted discussing drumsticks, "*do something!*"

Bill nodded circumspectly and Harry saw him drawing his wand out from under the table.

"Er..." Remus asked quietly, "what's going on?"

"Mr. Weasley decided that he's going to carve the turkey the Muggle way," Harry replied. Remus raised a concerned eyebrow at Harry who grinned.

"And he's never...?"

"Apparently not."

By now, Mr. Weasley had begun to hack quite terrifyingly and yet ineffectually at one of the drumsticks while Mr. Granger hovered over him offering platitudes and encouragement.

"That's right. You've got it now..."

Rising quietly from the table, Bill wandered over towards the knife block on the pretense of looking for the salt, trying not to draw his father's attention. Harry could have sworn he heard Bill muttering something in French as he pointed his wand at one of the knives.

"Wait a minute..." Mr. Granger was saying. "No, I don't think that's right. Try sawing with it a bit more instead of hacking..."

Without paying much attention to Mr. Granger's advice, Mr. Weasley took another swing at the turkey, sending bits of meat flying into the air. "Whoops!" Tracking the flying turkey, Mr. Weasley glanced around towards where Bill was still muttering over the knife. Remus, beside Harry, drew his wand.

At that moment, something seemed to land smack in the dish of mashed potatoes, causing white globs to hurl up into the air.

"Arthur!" Mrs. Weasley yelled, wiping a spot of potato off of her forehead.

"I didn't--" Mr. Weasley began, but Bill interrupted him.

"Here, Dad. Why don't you try this knife? Bit less dangerous."

"You think so?" Mr. Weasley asked, accepting the proffered blade from his son. Jabbing the meat once again with his fork, Mr. Weasley deftly began removing perfect slices of meat from the turkey.

"There!" Mr. Granger cried enthusiastically. "That's getting the hang of it!" He picked up a mangled drumstick between two fingers. "Who wants dark meat?"

For several hours, the house was full of the clink of silverware, the low din of conversation, and the satisfied grunts of full bellied Weasleys. Harry began to feel warm and sleepy watching the twins deftly stealing Percy's rolls when he wasn't looking, listening to Ron trying to explain Quidditch to Mr. Granger, and watching Remus watch everybody else. The sun had set, and the house was lit by glowing candlelight when Mrs. Weasley rose and began to clear the dishes.

The twins were sent to set up the camera for a big group picture, and Ginny and Charlie went along, ostensibly to help. Harry thought it was more likely that they just wanted to get out of cleaning up. Ron led Hermione into the living room as he began explaining the finer points of her new, used, Comet Two-Sixty while she listened politely with a glazed expression on her face. Harry hung back in the kitchen for a while, clearing plates and generally milling about listening to snatches of conversation.

Bill and Mr. Granger were talking to Percy, who was holding his wine glass out at arm's length and swirling the last of his wine around rather more violently than was necessary. Harry passed by and realized that Percy was talking about snogging some girl he'd met at the Ministry Christmas party.

"I was wondering, Molly," Harry heard Mrs. Granger say as she scraped plates into the garbage, "if you could tell me where I might be able to get a clock like that one." She pointed to Mrs. Weasley's excellent clock, all nine hands of which were currently pointing to 'home.'

"How are you feeling, old man," Arthur asked, dropping down onto the bench next to Remus. "I know the full moon was last night. Hope the trip wasn't too much for you."

"I wanted to thank you for that," Remus replied. "But you really shouldn't have, Arthur. Intercontinental portkeys aren't cheap--"

Arthur held up a hand to stop him. "We were glad to do it. Besides, I have a good friend in the Portkey Issuance Office who helped set it all up." He paused and gazed fondly at his wife. "We know it's been a hard year -- for everyone -- and I think Molly's been a bit lonely of late. There's so much going on and all the kids are growing up so fast. I mean, it's hard to believe that Ron will be out of school in another year..."

Remus nodded thoughtfully.

Arthur continued. "And Ginny will be gone the year after that, and, well, I think Molly just wanted to have a big family Christmas the way we used to do."

Remus looked slowly around at all the merry faces and smiled wanly. "I..." he paused and sighed. "Thank you for including me."

Suddenly, Mr. Weasley seemed to notice Harry loitering nearby, idly wringing a dishtowel in his hands.

"Have a good Christmas, Harry?" Mr. Weasley asked.

Harry grinned broadly. "Oh yeah," he said enthusiastically, "thanks for having me."

"Well, as I said," Mr. Weasley smiled, getting to his feet and taking his plate over to the sink, "Christmas is all about family."

"I think I get that," Harry replied. He glanced over at Remus and smiled.

Remus stared back at him, looking surprised.

"Better run on in, Harry," Mr. Weasley said, laying a hand on Harry's shoulder. "It sounds like Molly's about ready to take the photo." Harry nodded and headed for the door.

"I should be going," Remus said quietly.

"Wouldn't hear of it," Arthur retorted. "Molly's already made up Percy's room for you. Besides, you've barely had time to say hello to Harry."

Harry paused just on the other side of the doorframe, listening for Remus' reaction. There was a long pause. Then Mr. Weasley clapped Remus on the back.

"Good. Picture first, then bed."

"All right. ALL RIGHT!" Mrs. Weasley shouted as she tried to get everyone's attention. "Bill, Charlie, Percy, you three go in the back with your father and -- Ron, put that broom down this *instant* and get over here! Fred! Don't think I didn't see that. Now, let's see. Richard, Judy, you and Hermione stand on this end and -- Harry, dear! You stand over there by the twins. Arthur! Remus! No, no, Ron, you're much too tall to stand in the front with Hermione. Better be behind her. Yes. That's better. Remus, you can be on the other end there with Harry. Your hair looks *fine*, Ginny, so could you please come and join us for the picture? Scoot together everyone, and act like you enjoy one another. All right, everyone ready? George, for Merlin's sake, there's a mirror right over there. I can see perfectly well what you're doing. Ok everyone, watch the birdie!"

Harry stared at the old fashioned looking camera set up on a tripod in front of them all. A small panel in the top opened as Mrs. Weasley pointed her wand at it, and a bird that looked something like a cuckoo from a clock burst out of the top and bobbed, chirruping five times, before it disappeared back into the camera. Harry felt a hand on his shoulder and glanced up to see Remus smiling at him. Out of the back of the camera, from under the drape, there suddenly appeared a vast quantity of purplish smoke.

"That's it!" Mrs. Weasley exclaimed, breaking her pose and hurrying across to the camera. "It'll take a few minutes to develop. Percy, see if you can find the Christmas album for me, would you?"

"Mum!" Ron whined suddenly. "You're *not* dragging that old thing out, are you? Not when there're people over..."

"What old thing?" Hermione asked pleasantly as Mrs. Weasley fiddled with the camera and Ron shot Hermione a dangerous glower.

"Well," Mrs. Weasley replied a bit distractedly, "just about every year since Arthur and I have been married we've done a Christmas portrait of the whole family, all together and we've got them all in one album."

"Here it is!" Percy called jovially, waving a large, leather bound album over his head as he made his way towards the overstuffed sofa.

"1985!" Ginny shouted, bouncing onto the sofa next to him.

"1985!" the twins repeated in tandem.

"NO!" Ron yelled.

"What's 1985?" Harry asked, hurrying around behind the sofa to look over Percy's shoulder.

"NOTHING!" Ron roared. "IT'S NOTHING!"

Ginny motioned for Hermione to come sit next to her as Percy began turning through the pages. It was like a flipbook of the Weasleys' lives, each page a different photo, each photo a different year in their family history. At first, the pictures were of a very young Mr. and Mrs. Weasley in a tiny flat, standing in front of a rather sickly looking assortment of Christmas trees. Then the pictures began to include Bill as a baby, and a few years after that, Charlie. Slowly the Weasley family grew, and under the photograph for each year, Mrs. Weasley had written a caption.

"Fred and George's first Christmas," Ginny read.

"Handsome little tykes, weren't we?" George observed.

"Yeah," Charlie agreed, leaning over the sofa to look at the photos as well. "I wonder what happened." George stuck his tongue out at him.

"Ron's first Christmas," Ginny continued as Percy turned the pages.

"Oh!" Hermione cooed as the photographic infant Ron began to wail and the toddler twins both put their fingers in their ears.

"1985!" Fred prodded.

"I'm leaving," Ron announced. "You lot are sick and twisted, and I'm leaving."

"There!" Ginny cried breathlessly. "Stop there, Percy. 1985!"

Harry bent forward to get a better view of the photo, but he couldn't see anything special about it. Fred and George were sitting cross-legged on the floor in the front making bunny ears over each other's heads, Mr. Weasley was standing in the back with his arms around Bill and Charlie, Percy was standing next to Mrs. Weasley, who was sitting in a chair holding Ginny in her lap, and they were all smiling happily at the camera.

"But," Hermione said with a small frown, "where's Ron?"

"Wait for it..." Fred and George said in unison.

Suddenly, from outside the frame, a five-year-old Ron came streaking into view -- literally. He ran past the camera without a stitch of clothing except for one green sock. In the photo, Mrs. Weasley leaped out of her chair and began chasing after him as the little twins dissolved into fits of pointing and giggling while Percy frowned and the older boys chuckled.

"BRILLIANT!" George crowed happily.

"Gets funnier every time I see it," Fred said, wiping his eyes. Ginny was giggling wildly, and Hermione's eyes looked as though they were about to pop out of her head.

"I HATE YOU ALL!" Ron screamed from another room.

"Going to give us an encore, Ronnikins?" Fred yelled back.

"Don't forget the sock!" George added.

"Idiots," Percy said with a sniff. The five-year-old Ron ran back through the frame, this time with Mrs. Weasley chasing after him, bouncing Ginny on one hip. Percy snorted slightly. "Although, it is mildly amusing."

"Stop tormenting your brother," Mrs. Weasley said to the twins as she walked over, shaking the most recent picture that was still developing. "Just because we don't have photographic evidence of the two of you in your exhibitionist phase doesn't mean it didn't happen. And your nudity was always in stereo." Percy laughed quite hard at that.

"Turn to a fresh page, Percy. Ah. There we are." Mrs. Weasley cast a quick sticking charm on the photograph and placed it into the book so that Harry found himself looking down at the whole mob of them; smiling Grangers with their perfect teeth, the twins grinning and waving as Charlie grabbed Bill and put him in a headlock. And there, on the end, Remus was standing just behind Harry, one hand resting on his shoulder.

"I think this is the best one yet," Mrs. Weasley said in a slightly choked voice. They all murmured their agreement. Mrs. Weasley sniffed. "Well!" she said briskly. "Who wants pudding?"

Eventually they were able to coax Ron back into the room by bribing him with Christmas pudding, though he and Hermione obstinately refused to look at one another, and Ron's face remained bright red for quite a while. Then there was a commotion as Bill, Percy, and the Grangers all set off for home. Remus bid them all goodnight, turning in early, and Charlie and Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were talking quietly in the kitchen.

Harry stretched out happily on the floor in front of the sofa where Hermione was curled up going through one of the many books she had received. Ginny was sitting next to her, admiring the new dress robes her parents had given her for Christmas. Ron was slumped nearby in an armchair groaning softly.

"Too. Much. Pudding," he whimpered.

"Harry," Hermione said suddenly, "I meant to ask you. What was it you got from Professor Lindell?"

"Professor Lindell sent you a Christmas present?" Ginny asked.

"Yeah," Harry said, rolling over, looking for his satchel. "I forgot about it."

"What's a professor doing giving you gifts?" Ron demanded without opening his eyes. "She didn't give any of us presents."

"Dunno," Harry admitted, finding his bag and pulling the strange wooden cube out of it.

"What is it?" Ginny asked keenly, climbing down off the sofa to sit next to Harry on the floor.

"I'm not sure," Harry said. "I thought it was a box at first, but then -- wait a minute..." Harry suddenly realized that one side of the box twisted, like a rubix cube. He turned it slowly until he heard a satisfying click. All at once, the opposite side of the box slid open and a strangely diffuse beam of light shot out onto the Christmas tree. It was a picture, like a movie.

"That's our common room!" Ginny exclaimed, immediately recognizing the tapestries and squashy red armchairs.

"Point it at the wall, Harry," Hermione suggested.

Harry shifted the box around so that the beam of light was pointing at a blank space of wall. The common room was sparsely filled with students that Harry didn't recognize. Except for one -- a girl who looked to be about twelve or thirteen years old, sitting alone at a table.

"That's Professor Lindell!" he said, recognizing her glasses and pigtails.

"It can't be," Ron said, sitting up in his chair. "No one as good looking as she is starts out looking like that."

"Oh, honestly, Ron," Hermione scoffed.

"Wait!" Ginny said. A new group of girls had just entered the common room. They were all much older than Professor Lindell, and they were all grouped around another girl, one with long, deep red hair.

"Harry..." Hermione said, falteringly. "Do you think that's--"

"Yeah," Harry replied. "That's my mum." The girls were chattering and giggling, their voices sounding distant and tinny coming from the little wooden box.

"Open it, open it!" one of the girls cajoled as Lily Evans carried an enormous brown box into the middle of the common room.

"What if the boys are around -- you know who I mean," another girl cautioned. This caused the rest of the group to burst into giggles.

"Now, he can't even know it exists," Lily said firmly, looking around at each of the girls in turn, *"otherwise Merlin only knows what feats he might attempt to get a peek at it. I must swear you all to secrecy."* All of the girls around her nodded earnestly, huge smiles pasted across their faces.

"Let's take it upstairs," another girl said sensibly. She was very lovely, with long, strawberry-blond hair, and she looked vaguely familiar to Harry. Suddenly it hit him.

"That's Professor Lindell's sister!" he exclaimed.

"Penny," Hermione breathed.

"How do you--" Ron began.

"Shhh."

"All right," Lily was saying, *"make sure the coast is clear! He has spies EVERYWHERE!"* Several of the girls dashed up the dormitory stairs ahead of them as Lily readjusted the box on her hip. She and Penny were whispering to one another as they walked past Professor Lindell's table, then Lily stopped. She glanced at Penny who gave her a pained look and then rolled her eyes.

"Demetria," Lily said. It seemed to startle the girl, who jumped visibly. *"Come with us! We've got a secret. Do you want to see?"* Lily's eyes were shining brightly with mischief and mystery. Demetria glanced at her sister, who was obviously trying to remain neutral, before nodding and standing up from her chair. If there had been any doubt in their minds before as to the identity of the girl, it vanished as soon as she stood. Something about the way she moved, the way she carried herself across the room and up the stairs to the seventh year girls' dormitory reminded them all strongly of their Defense teacher.

"Quick! Close the door!!" The girls crowded around Lily as she made her way over to her bed and deposited the package on it, deftly unknotting the twine and lifting the lid. Demetria stood back, away from the others a bit, but watching all the time.

In a flurry of tissue paper and wrapping, Lily pulled a beautiful, deep green dress out of the box, and every girl in the room gasped. Harry heard Hermione and Ginny echo the sentiment.

The dress was long and looked to be made of velvety material. Set in the deep green background was an intricate pattern of vines and leaves, burnished into the fabric, so dark they were almost black. Lily swept it up and held it up in front of her, hurrying over to the full length mirror hung on the back of the dormitory door.

"He's going to die," one of the girls sighed ecstatically. *"Just keel over and die, that's what he'll do."*

"And if he doesn't," another girl added, *"every other boy in the room will."*

"I don't know why I even bother to go..." a third girl pined in a voice that was only half joking.

"James Potter doesn't deserve you, you know," Penny said with a little laugh as Lily did a pirouette in front of the mirror, allowing the dress' full skirt to fly out around her.

"I don't know," Lily replied with a sigh. *"I think he's got hidden depths."*

Penny snorted. *"That boy's about as deep as a teaspoon."*

Lily glanced up at her sharply. "Well that's why you're my backup, aren't you? Has Black asked you yet?"

Penny shook her head, but a wicked grin was spreading across her face. "No, and he doesn't have to. I asked Severus instead."

"What??" several of the girls shrieked in chorus. "Snape?"

"You did?" Lily asked, turning to look Penny in the eye.

Penny nodded. "And if that doesn't get Sirius high-and-mighty Black's attention, then nothing will!"

"Are you sure that's wise?" one of the other girls asked nervously. "I mean, Severus is a Slytherin! And he is a bit... odd. Isn't he? I don't know, Penny."

"And surely you realize that you might actually be putting his life in danger if Black sees the two of you together," Lily said flatly.

Penny smiled innocently.

"It's all fun and games 'til someone ends with green boils on his arse," Lily continued, ignoring her friend's expression. "And I don't want my date hexing yours across the dance floor. Besides, even if he can be an insufferable twit, Snape doesn't deserve to be a pawn in your romantic games."

Penny shook her head. "Not to worry, Lil. James'll be too busy looking at you to notice who I'm with. And Severus and I have known each other forever. I told him we would just be going as friends and he said he would be -- honored to escort me." She said the last with a very serious expression and a passable rendition of Snape's nasal drawl. Several of the other girls giggled. She winked at them.

"We'll see," Lily said, turning back to the mirror to continue admiring her dress. "And who knows? If James Potter manages to keep himself in line for an entire night sitting across the table from Severus Snape, well, I just might have to reconsider one of his incessant marriage proposals." All the girls laughed at that.

Lily turned to put the dress back in its box when she saw Demetria standing by the door. She smiled at the younger girl.

"What do you think, Demetria?" she asked, holding up the dress once more. "Do you think this will impress Big Head Potter?"

Demetria nodded, wide eyed. "I think it's lovely..." she said, her voice echoing suddenly. And then, just as abruptly as it had started, the image was gone and the lid of the little box slowly slid shut.

The four of them were silent for a while, staring at the space where the image had been, now only a bit of blank wall.

"Anyone want to tell me what the bloody hell that was all about?" Ron asked.

"Was there a card?" Ginny asked, looking down at the box in Harry's hands.

"Yeah," Harry said, remembering. "It said, 'I finally found a good one for you.'"

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX:

There was no place he would rather be, Harry decided the next day, than at the Burrow when all the Weasleys were home for the holidays. Even seeing Hogwarts for the first time each year could hardly hold a candle to the joy Harry felt when he stumbled down the stairs on Boxing Day, only to find just about all of his favorite people in the world gathered together around the Weasley's

enormous kitchen table. As much as Ron whinged about it, Harry also looked forward to Mrs. Weasley's fawning, to having her press second and third helpings on him when she thought he hadn't eaten enough, demand all of his socks and tee shirts to be washed (though he'd only brought two pairs), and absently try to smooth his unruly hair whenever she passed behind him. He loved listening to Mr. Weasley tell stories about the Muggle objects unscrupulous people were charming these days and loved answering random and inane questions about airplanes, vacuum cleaners, and portable toilets. He listened to Charlie's stories about the dragons he'd encountered, rolled his eyes with the others when Mrs. Weasley started harping on to Bill about his hair, and laughed harder than anyone when the twins slipped rainbow colored ink pellets into Ron's tea, dying each of his teeth a different shade of the rainbow.

Just as Ron was knocking over his chair in his haste to inflict painful humiliations on his brothers for offering him a toothbrush, two large owls swooped up to the burrow and landed on the sill of the kitchen window. The first bird tapped once, politely, asking to be let in. Then the other, apparently deciding that politeness was getting them nowhere, began hammering against the window with his beak until the glass threatened to break.

"All right, all right!" Mrs. Weasley yelled as she opened the window. "For Merlin's sake, we heard you the first time!"

A rather ugly, brown-dappled owl swooped eagerly into the room and landed on the kitchen table, scrabbling its talons against the wood and flapping its wings to maintain its balance, while knocking over everything within a four foot radius.

"No owls on the table," Mrs. Weasley said firmly, putting her hands on her hips. "Make your delivery and be off! Infernal creature..."

The owl waddled unceremoniously up the table to where Harry was looking interested and Remus was looking sheepishly at Molly.

"I *told* the post wizard *not* to give me this bird," Remus sighed. The owl shot him a cheeky glance before dropping a package down beside Harry's plate. It then looked around at them expectantly. Remus shook his head.

"Don't be expecting a tip, my friend. You're a day late and a Galleon short. Off with you, now." And he waved the owl away.

The owl ruffled its feathers indignantly, gave a little hoot, and took off for the window, upending the few things on the table he'd missed before.

"Happy Christmas, Harry," Remus said with a wry smile. "Sorry it's a bit late. I blame the post."

Harry grinned and was about to answer when the other owl swooped down and landed on the back of Remus' chair.

"Hedwig!" Harry cried happily. She cooed at him as she held out the package she was carrying in her beak.

"Hello gorgeous," Remus said, stroking her head. "But it's not me you want. I'm afraid I didn't bring any of those nice fat Lithuanian mice along -- or at least, not on purpose. But you're welcome to check my luggage." He nudged her gently and she squawked.

"Actually," Harry said, feeling suddenly and irrationally embarrassed. "It is for you. From me."

Remus turned to look at him curiously, and Harry felt himself blushing. He busied himself by untying the twine around the parcel the other owl had left him.

"You shouldn't have gone to any--"

"It wasn't any trouble," Harry said quickly, ripping into the brown paper covering his own box. Out of the corner of his eye, he watched as Remus set down his tea and deftly untied the twine around the parcel. He unfolded the paper rather than tearing it and smoothed each crease flat on the table before moving on to the next. Finally, he lifted the lid off of the box, removed the crumpled pages of the *Prophet* that Harry had used for packing, and extracted the note Harry had enclosed.

Quite suddenly, Harry felt a desperate need to be somewhere else -- anywhere else would do. Remus read the note quickly, snorting slightly and smiling, and Harry ducked his head sheepishly and poked at the remains of his breakfast with his fork.

"*A Collection of Modern English Poetry by Muggle Masters,*" Remus said with a gleam in his eye as he extracted the book after setting the note aside.

"Do you have it already?" Harry asked anxiously, voicing the doubt that had been nagging him since he'd selected it -- almost at random -- from the Flourish and Blotts catalogue. Remus smiled as he turned the book over in his hands.

"No, no," he assured Harry, opening the cover and flipping through the table of contents. "Some of my favorites are in here. Thank you, Harry."

"Didn't fancy you for a poet, Harry," George said thoughtfully munching on a cold piece of toast. Harry shrugged, more embarrassed by the minute.

"I'm a poet," Fred announced. "There once was a lass from Nantucket--"

"Fred!" Mrs. Weasley snapped, her eyes as cold as steel. Fred pulled a horrified face.

"Mum!" he cried. "You don't mean to say you've heard that one before?"

Harry chanced a sidelong glance at Remus who had set the box on his lap as he watched Fred and Mrs. Weasley bicker. Harry's mouth felt suddenly dry. He hadn't counted on Remus opening his gift in front of all the Weasleys; as a matter of fact, he hadn't thought he would even be in the same country when Remus opened it. Nervously, he fiddled with the end of a piece of the twine.

Remus was digging around in the box again and soon pulled out the socks, one pair in each hand. Harry's face felt hotter by the second and he wondered if there wasn't a chance it was about to spontaneously combust. He decided that exploding in a shower of sparks might even be preferable. At least it would distract the others from his incredibly stupid gift. He glanced up and saw Hermione watching him from across the table.

"Ron," she said suddenly and very loudly, "I think I'm ready for that flying lesson now." Everyone at the table turned to stare at her.

"You are?" Ron asked. "Brilliant!" He leapt out of his chair, grabbing Hermione's arm and pulling her along with him. "That's great! We'll go up to that paddock where we practice Quidditch. Fred! George! Don't suppose you brought your -- well pop off home and get them! You coming, Harry?"

"I'll be along in a bit," Harry replied. With a noisy double crack, the twins Disapparated to fetch their brooms, and Ginny rushed out of the kitchen following Ron.

"What else did you get, Remus?" Mrs. Weasley asked kindly.

"Some excellent socks," Remus replied steadily. His voice was unusually cheery, but he wasn't looking at Harry, and Harry was most definitely not looking at him.

"Look at that!" Mrs. Weasley said, fingering the cuff of one of the socks. "You have good taste, Harry. And everyone needs socks."

"What's in yours?" Mr. Weasley prompted. Harry looked down. He had completely forgotten the parcel he had been in the process of unwrapping. Quickly, he tore the remaining paper off. Inside was a small box of assorted Belgian chocolates.

"Best chocolate in Europe," Remus said with a grin. "After Lithuania, the Sect moved to Brussels--"

Mrs. Weasley made a hissing noise as she stood to refill the teapot. Remus blinked at her.

"Are you alright, Molly?"

"Watch what you say, Remus."

"About the Sect?" He shrugged. "Harry got that out of me a long time ago."

"I thought everyone was going to tell me what's going on from now on," Harry said pointedly.

"Indeed we are," Remus replied casually as he placed the lid back on his box. "You have a right to know. Unfortunately, there isn't all that much to tell at the moment," he said lightly. "Even though they've made me a member, they're not willing to share all their secrets until I provide them with a little incentive." Mrs. Weasley clucked disapprovingly from the corner. "What I have learned is that they definitely have a connection, somehow, to Voldemort."

"Have you found out if they're the ones attacking me?" Harry asked.

Remus shook his head. "No one has said anything about that yet, and I have to be careful..."

Mrs. Weasley was frowning at them both disapprovingly, arms crossed as the kettle whistled, forgotten, behind her. She glanced over at Mr. Weasley, who had been listening; he shook out his paper and cleared his throat. Remus sipped his tea calmly. Harry felt uncomfortable and so he did the only thing he could think of; he ate one of the chocolates.

"Harry," Mrs. Weasley scolded, "for breakfast?"

"Oh. M-y. 'od," he mumbled around the intoxicating chocolate melting on his tongue and seeping into his brain. He swallowed reverently. "This can't be legal."

Remus grinned.

Ron burst into the room, bundled from head to foot, wearing his new Quidditch gloves, and carrying Hermione's broom. Hermione was following reluctantly behind. She shot Harry a glance that said quite plainly this was entirely his fault and he had better be grateful for it.

"Hang on a sec," Harry said, getting up from the table. "Lemme grab my cloak." He paused in the doorway, turning to Remus. "Thanks for the chocolates," he said, feeling the flushed embarrassment creeping back up into his cheeks.

Remus nodded at him and smiled. "Thanks for the socks."

The flying lesson did not go well. Harry groaned in the biting December wind atop Stoatshead Hill, blowing into his hands and rubbing them to keep warm. Hermione was determined to keep as close to the ground as possible; she would rise barely high enough for her toes to leave the ground and then lean forward in terror, dropping quickly back to the earth.

Ron at first encouraged and cajoled her, but after a few failed attempts, his patience -- hardly that of a saint on the warmest days -- wore thin, and he resorted to prodding and bullying.

"Hermione, the definition of flying is that you have to actually leave the ground at some point, you know."

"I think I'm doing just fine, thanks."

"You've barely risen two inches!"

"Well, I want to make sure I can get back down again, don't I? What if I just started flying all willy-nilly and then couldn't get back down?"

Harry and Ginny watched for a while from the sidelines, occasionally offering pointers or words of encouragement, but eventually they left Ron to his reluctant pupil. The twins arrived not long after and began flying circles around Hermione, showing her how easy and fun it was to be airborne. Unfortunately, after George mistimed a loop-de-loop and fell into a compost heap, Hermione refused to sit on her broom for a good ten minutes.

"So," Harry said, half-watching Ron trying to coax Hermione back onto the broom, "what did you want to talk to me about the other day? You know, when Ron and I were busy fighting."

"Oh that..." Ginny said into her muffler, sounding uncomfortable. She began playing with a loose thread from one of the buttons on her cardigan, clearly unwilling to look at Harry. "You know what? It turned out to be nothing at all."

Harry frowned at her. "Are you sure? You've got my full attention now. No stupid overreacting or anything, I promise."

Ginny shook her head, her hair, done in pigtails, slapping at her wind-flushed cheeks, and she flashed him a brilliant smile, if perhaps a bit forced. "Nope. It was a false alarm. All is well. What do you say we make Fred and George give us a go on their brooms?"

Harry now wanted to know more than ever what it was Ginny wasn't telling him, but he shrugged and followed her over towards the compost heap.

Eventually, they did manage to get Hermione flying, but only just. It took Harry and Ginny flying on either side of her, ready to catch her if she fell, plus Ron running along behind, holding onto the end of the broom to help her steer, and they never did get more than a few feet off the ground. The sky, which had remained oppressive but obstinately dry, finally let loose with a flurry of snowflakes by the time they decided to return to The Burrow for some well needed hot chocolate and chairs in front of the fire.

"Did you see?" Hermione gushed, breathless and red faced as they trooped back into the Weasleys' kitchen. "Did you see me? I was flying!"

Mrs. Weasley smiled at her indulgently and shut the door against the wayward flakes with a flick of her wand.

Once the snow started, it didn't seem inclined to stop. All through the rest of that day and into the night, the snow fell steadily, collecting in thick drifts on the frozen ground. Harry and Hermione were both relieved to be at the warm, bustling Burrow rather than the empty, drafty Gryffindor tower, and as the Weasleys didn't see any reason to send them back to school, they extended their visit indefinitely. Remus too was persuaded to stay, though he had originally been adamant about leaving, and Harry couldn't quite imagine what Mr. Weasley had said to change his mind. But he was glad he had.

Later that night, Harry, Ron, and Hermione were happily settled in Ron's room, tired from the day's activity. "It's just as well," Hermione said from the foot of Ron's bed, looking up from her knitting. "I didn't fancy spending another night worrying that those dementors were still about." She shivered into Ron's thick quilt wrapped around her shoulders.

"Dementors?" Ron repeated looking up from the chess game he and Harry were playing on the floor.

"In Hogsmeade on Christmas Eve," Harry replied solemnly. "They Kissed some Muggle-born witch. It was all over the papers. Hermione got a bit freaked out by the idea of them so close."

Hermione raised an indignant eyebrow at him. "Right. And you weren't worried at all."

Harry shrugged and rolled his eyes clandestinely at Ron.

Hermione huffed. "As I recall, it was *your* idea for me to--" Hermione broke off, glancing quickly at Ron.

"To what?" Ron asked, sending one of his knights to decapitate Harry's bishop.

"Oh," Hermione said, suddenly very involved in her knitting. "Er..."

Ron glanced up at Harry.

"Nothing," Harry said as lightly as he could. "It was nothing really."

Ron frowned at him. "What's going on? I thought we weren't going to keep any more secrets from each other..."

Harry swallowed uncomfortably.

"We're not," Hermione said promptly. She took a deep breath. "It's really nothing. I just spent the night in your dormitory on Christmas Eve."

"Oh," Ron said reasonably, looking back down at the chessboard. Suddenly, his head snapped up. "You WHAT?? But that's-- You're a... You can't-- Whu?"

Hermione sniffed and seemed to be determined not to acknowledge the fact that she was blushing deeply. "It's not a big deal, Ron. It was only because of the dementors..."

Ron continued to sputter unintelligibly for a few moments, his ears turning a fiery shade of red. "Besides," Hermione added, getting into her stride, "it's not as though there's really anything *wrong* with that. Harry and I are both adults, aren't we Harry? Really, it was no different than the two of you staying in the same room."

"Yeah, right," Ron replied sarcastically, "no difference at all. Except that you're a GIRL!"

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Thank you, Ron. I'm glad you finally noticed."

"Well!" Ron exclaimed. He turned to Harry. "And I suppose the two of you just cuddled up in the bed together and--"

"Ron!" Hermione cried. "Don't be a toad! Harry slept in his bed and I slept in *yours*!"

Ron snapped his mouth shut rather suddenly and blinked several times, digesting this pronouncement. Hermione shifted uncomfortably on the bed. They were all quiet for a few tense moments.

"I think I'll see if Mrs. Weasley needs any help in the kitchen," Hermione said at last, slipping off the bed and hurrying out of the room.

For a while, Harry and Ron continued their chess game in silence. Harry's stomach was squirming uncomfortably. Girls sleeping in boy's dorms aside, it occurred to Harry that if he wanted to keep Ron and Hermione as friends, they would expect him to tell them his secrets. All of them. Including the one he had been putting off all term.

The longer you put it off, the harder it will be, he told himself.

After he first heard, he hadn't wanted to tell them at all. Then it had been a matter of waiting for the right time to tell them. Now he was beginning to understand that the right time would never

come. Ron moved his queen to take one of Harry's pawns, and Harry realized that he'd left his king unprotected. He moved his own queen. "Checkmate," he said suddenly, surprised.

"What? Oh. Right," Ron replied distractedly.

Harry frowned. "You OK?"

"Yeah," Ron replied lightly. "Why?"

"Well, it's just you've hardly ever lost a game of chess to me before."

Ron looked up, studying him hard. "Did anything happen, then? With Hermione?"

Harry gaped at him. "What?? No! You know it didn't."

"But you'd tell me if it had?"

"Of course I would, Ron, don't be--"

"Because I don't want to go on making a fool of myself if there's something between you two."

Harry shook his head emphatically. "There's not, and you know it. I wouldn't do that to you. Not after you've told me that you -- you know... I'll tease you about it mercilessly, but that's the extent of my cruelty, I swear."

Ron nodded, looking rather relieved. They heard Mrs. Weasley calling them to dinner, and both got up to go.

"She slept in my bed, huh?"

"Yeah. So just promise me you'll cast a silencing charm before you go visualizing it when we get back, right?"

"Perv."

"Tosser."

"So, did you see anything then?"

"Euargh! I'm going to pretend you didn't just ask me that."

"You'd tell me though?"

"Shut up, Ron."

"Who wants dessert?" George stood and asked, grinning wildly.

"Couldn't eat another thing if I tried," Ron moaned patting his stomach lovingly. "Why? Did you bring some more of the Entertain-Mints?"

"Something better," George replied, "and entirely new."

"Oh no," Hermione said with a roll of her eyes. Ginny grinned.

"No, no! These are brilliant!" Fred said, retrieving a large tin from the rucksack he'd dumped by the back door. "All new confection from the Brothers Weasley." He whipped the lid off to George's trumpeted fanfare. "I give you... Marsh-Mallows!"

"Marshmallows?" Hermione repeated. "Those are Muggle sweets."

George looked scandalized.

"Muggles don't make them like this!" Fred retorted, grabbing one of the fluffy sweets out of the tin. It was pale yellow and shaped like a very intricately carved sunburst. "Theirs are all just cylinders or cubes..."

"Boring!" George interjected.

"Ours are art!" Fred presented one of them to Ginny with a flourish. She regarded it warily.

"What's wrong with them?" she asked.

"Wrong with them?" George repeated, sounding appalled. "There's nothing wrong with them! They're perfect in every conceivable way."

"Better," Fred insisted.

Ginny looked doubtful but didn't bother to argue.

"I think what she means is, what will they do to us?" Hermione asked, cautiously accepting a pale green one shaped like a perfect, miniature tree.

Fred and George cast her perfectly matched looks of innocence.

"Not a thing," they assured her.

From the head of the table, Remus laughed. "You boys could sell sour milk to cows."

"Care to sample the merchandise?" Fred asked, offering Remus the tin.

"I forbid you to try your experimental concoctions on our guests!" Mrs. Weasley announced. "Remus, you don't have to take one."

Remus shrugged. "As there's very little that can *actually* kill me..." He took one shaped like a little blue bird and popped it into his mouth. He chewed experimentally a few times, while everyone around the table waited for him to explode or turn purple or start whistling like a bird.

Nothing happened.

"Tastes like a marshmallow," he announced.

"You see?" said George pressing the tin on Harry. Harry shook his head, too full even to contemplate more food.

"Bill? Charlie?"

"Oh, what the hell," Bill said, accepting the proffered sweets. "But what's the fun if they don't do anything?"

Fred grinned at him.

"None for me, thanks," Mr. Weasley said, standing and putting on his coat. "I'm going out to the shed for a bit, Molly."

"These are pretty good," Ron said, taking a handful from the tin and popping one in his mouth.

"I'll be in the living room if you want any help, Molly," Remus said.

Harry glanced up as he left the room. He'd been looking for a chance to talk to Remus alone all evening, and it seemed now was his chance. Quietly, he slipped out of the kitchen and dashed up the stairs to Ron's room, retrieving the little memory box from under his bed before hurtling back down the stairs again.

Remus had settled on the sofa nearest the fire and was reading when Harry came in the room.

"Remus, can I talk to you for a minute?"

Remus looked up and nodded, marking his place and setting the book aside. Harry realized that it was the poetry book and felt his face go hot again.

"What's up?" Remus asked. He was looking much healthier today: a more normal color in his cheeks and fewer shadows around his eyes. Mrs. Weasley hadn't stopped trying to feed him since he'd arrived, and if he sat still for more than two minutes at a time, she had a plate of something for him whether he wanted it or not. Harry plopped down onto the sofa across from him and held out the little wooden memory box.

"Professor Lindell gave it to me," he explained. "I... She -- well, it's a memory of my Mum." Remus took the box from him curiously.

"She knew Lily?" he asked, turning the box over in his hands.

"Well, sort of. Her sister, Penny, knew Mum I suppose."

Remus looked up sharply. "Penny -- of course! I'd forgotten she had a sister. Stupid of me." He laughed suddenly as he handed the box back to Harry. "She rather fancied Sirius if I remember correctly. Penny, that is."

"I thought," Harry began uncertainly. "I thought you might like to see it."

Remus shook his head. "Only works once for each memory, Harry. These boxes are a bit like miniature Pensieves, but the charms aren't as complex. Once they show the memory it's gone."

"Oh," Harry said, crestfallen. *Gone*.

"That's a very personal gift, a memory," Remus said, watching Harry thoughtfully. "You and Professor Lindell must be getting along well..."

Harry shrugged. He had intended to use the memory box to try to coax Remus into talking about what had happened to Penny Lindell, but now it didn't seem that important. It was stupid, really. The memory had been just that, but knowing that he couldn't see it again, he felt a bit like he'd lost something very important to him, a photo album left on a train and just... gone.

"What do you think of her?" Remus asked, interrupting Harry's disappointed musings.

"Oh, she's all right I suppose. She's really smart."

Remus nodded. "But, well, what I'm trying to ask is, where do you think her loyalties lie?"

Harry looked up, surprised.

Remus pressed on quickly. "I need her help, you see." He paused. "You remember I told you that the Sect is interested in Eternal Youth? Well, they were very keen on letting me in *because* I am a werewolf. They have a particular interest in particular attributes, especially with regard to the ability to heal." His hand drifted unconsciously up to his collar where, the night before, Harry had seen several angry red welts.

Harry frowned. "They want to be werewolves?"

Remus smiled wryly. "No. They want the werewolf's magic without the negative side effects."

"And they expect you to give it to them?" Harry surmised.

"Something like that." Remus cadged. "I have a few ideas, but it would take me months -- if not years -- to do all the research I would need. I was hoping your professor might be able to help me, especially if she's as good a Scriptionist as everyone says she is." He sighed. "But she could be more a liability than an asset if her sympathies don't lie with us."

Harry shifted uncomfortably in his seat. Something didn't make sense. "Why don't you ask Dumbledore? I mean, wouldn't he know -- better than me, at any rate?"

Remus sighed, rubbing the bridge of his nose with one weary hand. For a moment, he looked like he was about to say something, then changed his mind. "Dumbledore is being... elusive. As usual, I suppose. When I asked him, all he would say was that it was my decision whether or not to trust her. I don't even know her, so I'm asking you."

Harry was flattered; it was a little silly, he realized, but he couldn't help but feel a little surge of pride that Remus was asking for his opinion.

"I think she's all right," he said at last. "I mean, I certainly don't think she's a Death Eater, if that's what you're asking."

"The Lindells are a very old family," Remus replied. "Several of Penny's cousins were in Slytherin and openly supported the Death Eaters. Penny herself..."

"What?" Harry asked eagerly, his curiosity overcoming him.

Remus sighed. "We suspected that Penny's husband, Uli, was a Death Eater," he said slowly, a sad expression creeping across his face. "But she was a good friend of Lily's, and Lily told her what James and the rest had found. Penny denied it at first, but even she couldn't make all the pieces add up. She told Lily she was going to confront him about it. She planned to leave him if he couldn't give her an explanation, and then..." Remus glanced up at Harry. "And then she died."

"You were at her funeral," Harry said.

Remus frowned. "How did you--"

"I saw it," he replied. "In Professor Lindell's memory, the first time I did Legilimency. You went with my Mum."

"She asked me to go," Remus replied with a shrug. "She was afraid that James would make a scene."

"Because Snape would be there," Harry concluded.

"And Malfoy," Remus added. Harry must have looked surprised. "Uli Malfoy," Remus explained, "Penny's husband."

Suddenly, there was a loud clatter of falling chairs. Remus and Harry jumped as Ron poked his head into the room. "Where's Harry? My mate Harry! My best mate Harry -- come and have some sweets!"

Remus raised an eyebrow and reached for his book. With a shrug, Harry followed Ron back into the kitchen.

Harry wandered into the kitchen to a very strange scene. Bill and Charlie were sitting near the fire arm wrestling; Ginny was lying on the floor under the table, singing to herself; Hermione was sitting on the end of the table where Ron plunked down into a chair and leaned back dangerously in his chair; and -- perhaps most disturbingly of all -- Fred and George were at the sink washing up.

"What's going on?" Harry asked, dropping down into a chair next to Ron and setting his memory box on the table.

"Nothin'," Ron said, grinning. "Have a marshmallow! They're brilliant."

"I wonder where that came from, brilliant," Hermione said thoughtfully, kicking her feet back and forth off the edge of the table wildly. "Do you think it was originally supposed to be brilliant, like intelligent, or brilliant like shiny?"

Harry took a Marsh-Mellow from the nearly empty tin and popped it into his mouth. It wasn't all that special. Just tasted like a regular old marshmallow to him.

"Er... Why is Ginny under the table?" he asked Hermione.

"I think the eta-- enta-- roots of slang words are so much more interesting than the roots of regular words, don't you Ron?"

"Ha! ROOTS!"

Harry stared from Ron to Hermione and back again as he popped another Marsh-Mellow into his mouth. "No, seriously," he said, "what's going on?"

"Need a refill lads?" George asked, offering Bill and Charlie some cocoa from a saucepan. Both of the older Weasley boys held out their mugs to be refilled and Fred surreptitiously dropped a small handful of Marsh-Mallows in.

"We three kings of orient are," Ginny sang in a very high voice. "Tried to smoke a rubber cigar!"

"There's a thought," Fred said, coming to sit down next to Harry. "Rubber cigars. What do you reckon, George?"

"Nah," said George, carefully pulling out his chair so as not to step on his little sister. "Been done to death."

"Yeah, well I once got charged by two Romanian Longhorns at once. Nearly took my head off in one bite those buggers did." Charlie was banging on the little end table between him and Bill for emphasis.

"Dragons've got nothing on mummies," Bill scoffed. "Those ancient sots'll curse you as soon as look at you! Had one once that was so protective of her treasure she'd burn yer eyes right outta yer head." He took a large swig of his cocoa dramatically. "Took that bint down with one spell I did."

"Aren't you having any?" Harry asked George as he accepted a mug of cocoa filled to the brim with Marsh-Mallows. "These thingies are pretty good, you know?"

"Oh we know," George grinned. "Our Marsh-Mallows are going to be a big hit. Especially with your demographic."

"Now *there's* an interesting word," Hermione said thoughtfully. "Demographic. DEMO-graphic. Demographic. Demo. Graphic."

"I love you, mate," Ron said suddenly, throwing an arm around Harry's shoulders.

"What's that?" Harry asked. He found he was having rather a hard time following the conversations going on around him.

"And you!" Ron said, pointing at his brothers. "I love you too! Gred and Forge!" The twins dissolved into fits of giggles.

"Siiiiilent night. Hoooooooly night!" Ginny sang shrilly.

"Ron," Fred said through his laughter, "Ron, tell Harry your brilliant idea."

"Right!" Ron shouted pointing first at Fred and then at Harry. "Right! Brilliant it is! My idea!" He grinned wildly for a second and then turned to frown at Fred. "What was it again?"

"About Hermione going for Prime Minister."

"Oh right." He turned to look back at Harry. "I think Hermione should go for Prime Minister."

Harry took a swallow of his cocoa, swirling it around to get the last of the melted marshmallows off of the sides. "Why?" he asked, frowning into his almost empty cup.

"Well, she's bright, isn't she?"

"Yeah."

"And right pretty too."

Harry looked up as Fred and George doubled over laughing. "What?"

"Well yeah!" Ron exclaimed. "Anybody who's going to be on fellytishion has to be smart looking, don't they?"

"I wouldn't want to do it just to look smart," Hermione said airily, looking at the ceiling. "I'd want to make a difference. The first witch in parliament." She looked thoughtful for a moment. "Although, if they wanted to put me on television, I suppose that would be okay too..."

"Well, we'll just see about that, won't we?" Bill said, standing up. He charged, somewhat unsteadily into the next room with Charlie hot on his heels. "MUM! Where's your tape measure??"

"What do they want a tape measure for?" Hermione asked. Harry noticed that she was starting to look a little ill.

Ron started to snigger. "I think they're measuring their wands..."

"God rest ye merry hippogriffs, let nothing you dismay!"

Harry bent over and looked under the table. Ginny was lying on her back under the table, one leg crossed over the other, singing quietly to herself.

"Oy," he said. She looked over at him. "Don't sing that one, right?"

"I'll sing what I want to, Harry Potter!" she said and stuck her tongue out at him. Harry frowned, his chest painfully tight as he pulled his head back out from under the table. Why couldn't she just stop singing that song?

"Where are my elbows?" Ron demanded suddenly. He was twisting around so far in his seat that he was in danger of falling out of it. "I can't feel my elbows!"

"I think I'm going to be sick," Hermione announced, jumping down off the table, taking a moment to steady herself, then bolting for the door.

"Take it easy, Ron," Fred said, putting a hand out to steady him. "I'm sure your elbows will be back in the morning." He glanced over at George. "Think he might have had a few too many," he hissed.

George nodded. He stood up and grabbed Ron by one of his wayward elbows. "Come on Ronnie. Let's get you to bed." Ron stood and stumbled slightly, causing Fred to grab his other elbow.

"Harry," Fred said, shooting a glance over his shoulder as they led Ron towards the door. "Think you can find your way upstairs by yourself?"

Harry grunted and crossed his arms over his chest. He didn't particularly want to talk, or think, or anything. He had too many thoughts bouncing around his head. Father Christmas hats on dead house elves. *God rest ye Merry Hippogriffs...* sang a husky voice across his memory. *"Who was that man with the abysmal singing voice?"* Harry's scar began to burn. All his fault... All his fault...

He shook his head angrily. Thinking like that wouldn't get him anywhere, even if it were true. And it wasn't exactly his fault. It was Dumbledore's fault for not telling him about the prophecy. If he'd known what was in the Department of Mysteries...

"Ow," he said aloud, rubbing his forehead.

The prophecy. He had to tell the others, and soon. If he didn't, and they found out some other way... Ginny was still humming that stupid song under the table. Glaring, Harry kicked the chair nearest to him and it bumped into the table, sending the memory box skidding a few inches across the scarred wooden surface. Harry stared at it.

Remus had said it worked like a Pensieve. Grabbing the box, Harry twisted the end until the other side slid obligingly open. He had seen Dumbledore and Snape both use the Pensieve; it had seemed easy enough. Drawing his wand out of his back pocket, Harry put it to his temple, thinking hard about that horrible hour he'd spent in Dumbledore's office last May. Drawing the wand away from his head, he saw a thin strand of silvery stuff clinging to the end of it, and his eyes widened. That was his memory, his *thoughts*... Suddenly, the silvery stuff was sucked off the end of the wand down into the box which slid quickly shut with a loud click.

Harry blinked at it. That was all there was? He'd expected something a little more grand. Still, it was done. Grabbing the box, Harry got up and headed, for the door, only stumbling once when he caught his foot on the edge of a chair.

"G'night, Harry," someone called. Harry turned to see who was talking to him, but no one was there. Then he remembered that Ginny was under the table.

"Oh. Night -- HEY!" Harry tried to turn to leave the room, but he found that his head seemed to be frozen in place. He couldn't turn it to look from side to side, and though he could move the rest of his body, he was effectively glued in place. He tried not to panic.

Ginny crawled out from under the table and slowly got to her feet, giggling.

"Didn't Ron warn you about the mistletoe?" she asked, walking towards him.

"I'm stuck!" Harry said, rather unnecessarily.

"I can see that," Ginny replied. She stopped a few feet in front of him and stood there, watching with her hands on her hips, and her mother's expression on her face.

"How do I get un-stuck?" Harry demanded.

"It's mistletoe. How do you think?"

Harry frowned. "You're not going to make this easy for me, are you?"

Ginny grinned. "What's in it for me?" she asked.

Harry thought about this for a moment. "My undying gratitude?" he suggested. Ginny raised an eyebrow at him.

"It's a start," she said with a sigh. She took another step forward so that they were face to face. Harry shifted uncomfortably from one foot to the other. Rolling her eyes, Ginny leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek.

"Thank--huh!" Harry tried to take a step, but his head remained firmly held in place. "It didn't work!"

"Well I can see that," Ginny retorted. "Those stupid twits."

"What?" Harry demanded.

"They've obviously charmed it so that it has to be a -- a real kiss," Ginny replied. She started to blush, right up to her ears.

"Oh," Harry said, feeling his own face reddening. "Well, it won't be that bad."

Ginny made a face at him. "Thanks a lot!"

"You know what I mean..."

"Well, close your eyes."

"Why?"

"I can't kiss you with you staring at me like a dead fish!"

"Oh."

"Stop fidgeting."

"I can't help it! You don't know how weird it is to have your head stuck like this."

"Well, just hold still for a minute!"

Suddenly, Harry felt her hands on either side of his face, and before he could react, he was kissing Ginny. He was *kissing* Ginny. *Ginny*.

He pulled back suddenly and, realizing that his head was free, took several large steps back out of the doorway. He and Ginny stared at each other for a long moment from either side of the doorway, and Harry found that he suddenly felt very lightheaded and awkward.

"Er..." he said. "Thanks."

"Don't mention it."

"I don't think I will."

"Good! I mean, good."

"Well."

"Yeah."

"G'night then."

"Goodnight, Harry."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN: Revelations

"Oh, my head. What hit me?"

Harry looked up from where he was dressing at Ron, who had rolled over and pulled his pillow over his head in defense against the morning sun now blazing through his windows.

"The floor, I think," Harry replied unconcernedly. "Fred said they had some trouble getting you up the stairs."

"Those bloody bastards," Ron moaned. "Why didn't they tell us what was in those stupid things?"

Harry smirked. "Presumably because that would have spoiled the fun of watching you get toasted on Marsh-Mallows."

Ron glared at him.

Harry reached for his towel and toothbrush, ignoring Ron's look, and noticed the memory box sitting on top of the dresser. His own recall of the previous night was more than a little blurred, but he distinctly remembered putting his memory into the box. He reached out and ran a finger tentatively over the raised carvings. It had seemed like a good idea at the time. Then again, Hermione going for Prime Minister because she would look smart on TV had also seemed like a good idea.

"Hey Ron," he said, his voice cracking inopportunistly. Ron, who was again buried under the covers, did not seem to notice.

"Yeah?" came his muffled reply.

"I need to talk to you and Hermione; after breakfast maybe?"

Ron threw back the covers to squint at Harry curiously. "What's up?" he asked.

"Nothing really," Harry insisted. "I just need to tell you some stuff. Alone," he added significantly.

Ron nodded and Harry headed for the bathroom, his stomach tied painfully in knots.

The twins turned up for breakfast, and only the threat of Mrs. Weasley finding out what had happened the previous evening restrained Ron from attempting double fratricide -- that and his blinding headache.

Bill and Charlie had apparently gone back to Bill's flat at some point during the night and had not yet reappeared. Mr. Weasley had already left for work. Hermione was looking rather green and barely touched the plate of kippers and tomatoes that Mrs. Weasley put in front of her. Ginny seemed intent on stirring as much sugar as physically possible into the coffee she'd convinced her mother to make her. She glanced up when Harry came in, blushed brilliantly red, and promptly knocked the butter off the table with her elbow.

"You lot are awfully quiet this morning," Remus observed placidly. "Late night?"

Fred sniggered into his plate and George grinned wildly at Ron.

"Hermione, aren't you feeling well?" Mrs. Weasley asked. "You've hardly touched your kippers. They're very fresh. Bought them from the fishmongers just yesterday."

Hermione's eyes bulged slightly as she stared down at her breakfast. She shook her head. "Just not very hungry is all," she whispered.

Harry poked at his own breakfast halfheartedly. His stomach felt like lead, and it had nothing to do with the Marsh-Mallows.

"How 'bout you, Harry," Fred whispered theatrically as Mrs. Weasley got up to get more tomatoes from the stove, "any adverse side effects?"

"You're evil," Harry hissed under his breath. "Evil incarnate, the both of you. Why didn't you *tell* us what they would do?"

George scoffed. "Evil doesn't tell."

"Wait 'till you see what we've brought you today and *then* tell us we're evil," Fred said with a mad grin.

"Do they give hangovers, then?" Remus asked airily. Fred and George whipped around to stare at him.

"Yes," Ron said firmly through gritted teeth.

"How did you--" George began.

"You only had the one..." Fred finished.

Remus smirked. "I smelled the Firewhiskey in them as soon as you opened the tin." He tapped the side of his nose and took another drink of his tea as Mrs. Weasley shuffled past with the skillet, dishing out tomatoes. "Rather brilliant, actually," he whispered.

Remus turned to Harry and smiled wistfully. "Sirius certainly would have appreciated them," he said so softly that only Harry could hear. Harry's stomach sank into his knees as Mrs. Weasley approached him with her skillet.

"Wouldn't you like a bit more, dear?" she asked.

Harry stood up abruptly. "Actually, I think I'd like to be excused." He waited just long enough for Mrs. Weasley's nod before bolting for the kitchen door, feeling Remus' eyes on the back of his head, and hearing Ron make a similar request.

You have to do this, he told himself firmly. Just open the box and get it over with. Telling them can't be any worse than not telling them has been...

Inside Ron's bedroom, Harry stared at the box sitting on Ron's dresser and took a seat on the camp-bed next to Ron's bed. He wondered if he wasn't getting worked up for nothing. It might not even have worked, as he had been mildly inebriated the night before.

Ron followed him into the room a few moments later with Hermione trailing at his heels. She wrapped her arms around her stomach and sat down on the end of Ron's bed, hunched over slightly. "So what's up?" she asked. "Ron said you wanted to talk to us."

"Er, yeah..." Harry said reluctantly.

"Is this about last night?" Ron asked.

Harry's head snapped up. "What about last night?" he demanded.

Ron squinted at him. "You and Remus. Did he tell you something about the Sect?"

"Oh," Harry sighed, relieved. "Not really, but he did tell me something about Professor Lindell: her sister Penny married a Death Eater -- a Malfoy!"

"What?" Ron squawked. "No way."

"That would explain a lot," Hermione reasoned.

"Like what?" Ron asked, frowning.

"Like why Professor Lindell thought her sister had been murdered. If her brother-in-law was a known Death Eater, it's no wonder she was suspicious."

"And why Penny was friends with Snape," Harry added. "I mean, if she married a Malfoy, that means she was probably friends with lots of Slytherins, not just him."

"That must be why Professor Lindell hates Snape so much," Hermione breathed. "She thinks he knew about her sister's murder."

They were all quiet for a moment, digesting the new information. Suddenly, there was a knock at the door.

"Everybody decent?" Ginny called through the closed door.

Harry balked.

"No more than usual," Hermione replied, smirking. Ginny threw open the door, followed closely by the twins.

"So, no hard feelings, then?" Fred asked, striding confidently into the room. "We were just having a bit of fun after all, I mean -- you did have fun, didn't you?"

"You are *so* going to pay for that little bit of *fun*," Ron growled. "You won't know where, or when, or how, but you'll pay."

"Will we know that you've done anything?" Fred asked casually, picking his teeth in the mirror on Ron's door.

Ginny looked around the room for a minute and then tentatively sat down next to Harry on his bed. She smiled at him and quickly looked away.

"Hey, what's this, Ron?" George asked, picking up the memory box from Ron's dresser and beginning to fiddle with it.

"That's mine!" Harry said quickly, his heart starting to pound as he reached for it.

George raised the box away from Harry's desperate grasp.

"Oh yeah," Ron said, "that's that memory thingy that Professor Lindell gave Harry..."

"I want to see," Fred said, walking over to his brother and snatching it from over his head. "You said she was a looker, right Ron?"

Fred was now poking at the box on the other side of the room.

"No!" Harry cried, getting to his feet. "Remus said it would only work once--"

But it was too late. Harry heard the box click ominously as Fred found the revolving piece, and he watched in horror as the little lid slid back and the picture shot onto the ceiling. For a moment, he clung to the faintest hope that Remus was wrong -- that it would show the Gryffindor common room and a girl with glasses and long auburn braids, but as George snatched the box from Fred and swung it around so that it projected against a blank stretch of wall, he knew that wasn't to

be. Dumbledore looked out over Ron's room, a sad, weary expression on his tired old face; Harry turned away and cupped his face in his hands.

"*The prophecy's smashed,*" he heard his own voice say, distant, tinny, sounding strange and vacant disembodied from his head.

"Prophecy?" Fred said. "What pro--"

"Shhh!" Ron insisted, holding up a hand.

Harry sank back down onto the bed, dread seeping through him like a slow chill, freezing him solid from the inside out.

"*The thing that smashed was merely a record of the prophecy kept by the Department of Mysteries...*" Dumbledore's voice was saying. "*But the prophecy was made to somebody, and that person has the means of recalling it perfectly.*" Harry heard Hermione's sharp intake of breath.

He lowered his hands and watched the others as they watched the wavering image on the wall, transfixed. The twins slowly sank down onto Ron's trunk at the end of his bed, their eyes never leaving the wall; George was very careful not to disrupt the image from the box in his hands.

Hermione and Ron were watching with similar expressions of insatiable curiosity. Harry couldn't breathe. Of course they would want to know what the prophecy said, he reasoned. They had, after all, risked their lives trying to keep it from the Death Eaters. But that didn't mean that they should.

Harry saw Dumbledore remove the Pensieve from the cabinet beside Fawkes' perch, saw him draw the memory from his temple, the silvery strands just barely visible in the little image on the wall. But as the tiny figure of Professor Trelawney rose from the stone basin, Harry averted his eyes. He had watched it once, and lived it a thousand times over in his dreams; he did not need to see it again.

"...AND EITHER MUST DIE AT THE HAND OF THE OTHER FOR NEITHER CAN LIVE WHILE THE OTHER SURVIVES....THE ONE WITH THE POWER TO VANQUISH THE DARK LORD WILL BE BORN AS THE SEVENTH MONTH DIES...."

The last word echoed strangely as the picture flickered and died. The room was silent as the little lid of the box slid shut with a final click. Harry couldn't bring himself to look up. He felt old tears, long repressed, stinging at his eyes, and heard the pounding of his own blood in his ears. He was sitting on the edge of the cot, leaning forward, his hands clasped together between his knees, as though he were praying. For what, he wasn't sure.

The silence was palpable, as though everything was suddenly swathed in cotton since the memory had ended. Harry fought hard to swallow around the lump in his throat. When he looked up he knew he would see Ron's dumbstruck, frightened, face; he would see Hermione's look of horror, and have to listen to her insist that they go to Dumbledore. Harry felt Ginny moving next to him. The mattress was shaking.

Across from him, Ron stood up abruptly and kicked the wall. Harry jumped at the sound of his foot crashing into the baseboard, but he couldn't bring himself to look up.

Even the twins were silent, and Harry felt that this was an ominous sign. Whenever something bad happened to him in the past, the twins had been there to make light of it, joke about it, make it all seem a bit less hopeless; now they had nothing to say.

"It's not true," Hermione stated at last, shattering the silence. Her voice was eerily calm and composed. "Prophecies indeed. What a load of rubbish." Harry didn't answer. He heard her stand and felt her footfalls reverberating through the floor as she began to pace. "I mean," she continued, addressing no one in particular, "you can't honestly believe that sort of thing. Trelawney is a fraud. We all know it. A fake and a fraud. I wouldn't trust her to predict the weather let alone the outcome of a war!"

"Hermione," Ron said softly.

"No!" she snapped. "I refuse to believe it. It isn't true. Remember all those times she saw the Grim in Harry's tealeaves? She kept telling us that he would be dead before the year was out, and he wasn't, was he?"

"Harry," she said suddenly, coming to stand in front of him. "Harry, say something. Tell them it isn't true."

He couldn't even lift his head. He was so tired.

"Tell them you don't believe it, Harry."

"Hermione..."

"No, Ron! It isn't true. It can't be true. Because, if it is... If it is..."

Harry was clenching his hands together so tightly that his fingernails were digging into the backs of his hands. Hermione had stopped raving. He stared at his hands, white knuckles, red marks where his fingers were digging into the skin. He took a deep breath at last and raised his head.

Next to him on the cot, Ginny had pulled her knees up to her chest. Her face was resting on her fists clasped together atop her knees, and her whole body was shaking as she stared blankly in disbelief. Harry considered reaching out to her, but the thought of her crying on his shoulder made it all seem too real, and he looked away.

Hermione and Ron were standing together in the middle of the room. Ron had his arms around her, holding her tightly to him, one hand resting possessively on the back of her head, fingers nestled in her hair. Hermione had her head on his chest and her eyes squeezed shut, fingers clutching at the fabric of his shirt.

Harry had seen Hermione cry before. He had been the cause of it more than once, and so he knew what it looked like. Always before, her crying had consisted of a lot of snuffling, red puffy eyes, and occasionally even a high pitched bawling that sent both Harry and Ron running in horror. But now...

Now she was just crying. She turned her head to one side, and he watched the streams of tears running down her face in an expression of silent grief; he felt his own eyes begin to prickle as he watched her, and hastily looked away.

Ron's eyes were dry but vacant, staring off into space as he held Hermione and tried to comfort her. His expression was serious and set, but it wasn't the gaping disbelief that Harry had been expecting. It wasn't the fear he remembered seeing in his best friend's expression whenever Harry said the name Voldemort or spoke about him. Ron looked strangely calm, resigned, determined, and distinctly unafraid. Harry's mind reeled for a moment, trying to decide who it reminded him of -- Bill perhaps, or Charlie -- before he realized that it was just Ron. Just Ron, but looking older than he had ever looked before.

He glanced at last at the silent twins who were looking not at him, but at one another. They too looked serious, their regularly flapping jaws set, their laughing eyes somber. It was not an expression he was accustomed to seeing on their normally jovial faces.

Everything seemed frozen. But for the soft sounds of the others breathing, Harry could hear nothing. It was as though someone had taken a snapshot -- a plain, Muggle photograph -- and frozen this wretched moment in time.

Suddenly, tentatively, a hand reached out and covered both of his. Harry marveled at how much smaller Ginny's hands were than his own. He looked over slowly to see Ginny looking directly at him, biting her lip, her blue eyes wide and firm, trying to blink back the tears that were finally spilling out of the corners. She didn't say anything at first, just squeezed his hand tightly. Harry felt his heart beating painfully, and wondered if it had, at some point, stopped.

Harry tried desperately to think of something to say. He wanted to tell her to stop crying. He wanted to tell her that it would all be okay, but he sat in silence, fighting the raw, bitter feeling in the back of his throat. It was the same feeling that had engulfed him in Dumbledore's office that warm spring morning. It had not stopped hurting, he realized, he'd just gotten used to it. He wanted to leave the room, wanted to stomp the frozen ground outside, to scream at the sky. Yet still he sat.

"You should have told us sooner," Ginny whispered. "You shouldn't have had to carry this all alone, not after everything..."

Harry just shook his head. He could not explain.

Hermione broke away from Ron at last, and she seemed to crumple, sitting down on the floor where she had been standing, curling her feet up under her, wiping her face with the backs of her hands. Ron, arms empty, began to pace the room, shoving his hands deep into his pockets and hunching over as he strode three steps across and three steps back.

"This doesn't change anything," Ron said finally as he lowered himself back down onto the bed. His voice seemed loud and unfamiliar in the silence. He shrugged. "I mean, we all knew..."

"Wait," Fred said hollowly. "Just wait a minute here. What are we saying?"

"Neither can live while the other survives..." George repeated, his eyes glazed and voice uncertain.

"Are we saying that Harry is supposed to... to--"

"To kill Voldemort," Harry said suddenly. "Or die trying." He tried to make his voice sound light, unconcerned, but it came out dead and emotionless instead. They all stared at him, and he looked into the eyes of each.

This is the truth, he thought as he looked from one to the next and willed them to see it. We all wanted the truth, but we didn't want this... Even Hermione looked up and met his gaze at last.

"Do you believe it?" she demanded. Harry blinked. He hadn't ever really thought about whether or not he believed it. Dumbledore said it was so, and he had accepted it. Not happily, not willingly, but he had accepted it -- eventually.

"I don't think it matters what I believe," he replied at last.

"Of course it matters!" Hermione began, rising to her knees to look him in the eye. "Harry, if it isn't true--"

"If it isn't true, it won't make any difference. Voldemort will still come after me. He'll still want me dead."

"But he doesn't know about the prophecy!" Hermione said desperately. "He doesn't know--"

"He knows part of it," Harry replied calmly. "The first part. That's why he killed my parents and why he tried to kill me. That's why he marked me. He didn't know he was doing it at the time, but that's what happened."

"But Harry--"

"The prophecy could have meant me, or it could have meant another wizard born at the same time, but it said that Voldemort would choose one of us and mark him as his equal. He chose me."

"It doesn't matter," Ron said firmly. "And it doesn't change anything. We all knew it from the start, even if we didn't. It's been all about you from the very beginning. You're The Boy Who Lived." He looked up at Harry, his expression firm and inscrutable. "And we were with you at the beginning,

and we're with you now. To the end." He glanced down at the floor then, suddenly embarrassed by what he had said. "And that's all."

The others were quiet for a long moment. Then Fred cleared his throat. George nodded.

Hermione was still staring at Harry, silently begging him to tell her that it was all a bad dream. She looked exactly the way he'd felt in Dumbledore's office all those months ago.

"So," Fred said. "Looks like we've got work to do."

Harry frowned at him. "Work?"

Ron gave Harry the look he usually reserved for second years who questioned his authority. "We've got a lot of work to do if we're going to help you fight," he said very slowly and clearly, as though speaking to a small child.

"What? No! You heard what it said--"

"Yeah, sure I did," Ron interrupted him. "It said that you have to kill Voldemort. Fine. Good. The sooner the better, I say. But it didn't say that you have to do it alone."

"And it didn't say anything about the hordes of angry Death Eaters at his beck and call," George added.

Harry was shaking his head emphatically. "NO. You're not going to fight. Look what happened last time--"

"You went without us last time," Fred said sensibly.

"No!" Harry shouted. "Look, just because I have to die doesn't mean that the rest of you--"

"Die?" Ginny yelped, matching Harry's volume. "Nobody is going to die except Vol-Voldemort." She crossed her arms over her chest determinedly. "We won't let you die. And I, for one, plan to live forever."

"Here, here!" Fred agreed, raising an imaginary glass.

Harry began to feel that the conversation was getting out of hand. Suddenly, Hermione stood up and headed for the door.

"Where are you going?" Harry asked her. She didn't even pause.

"To get my new books. There's bound to be something useful in them..."

"Why?" Harry demanded.

Hermione paused at the doorway and blinked at him. "It's what I do," she replied.

"She's right," Fred said with a nod. "We've got lots to do and less time to do it in! George, where did we put that--"

"Under the floorboards in Ginny's room."

"What?" Ginny snapped, leaping off the cot and following her brothers out of the room. "What did you put under my floor?" She stood to follow them out the door, but paused for a moment and glanced back at Harry, her expression unreadable.

Harry watched them go, slack-jawed and dumbstruck. He looked back at Ron who was watching him closely.

"Want another round of chess then?" he asked, reaching under the bed for the box. "That last game wasn't really fair. I mean, I was distracted--"

"Ron," Harry said in what he hoped was a reasonable tone. "What just happened?"

Ron looked up at him sympathetically. "It's OK, Harry, really. But no matter how much might think you'd like to, you're not going to go through this alone."

The rest of the day passed quietly. Ron didn't say much and neither did Harry. The twins left almost immediately after tearing up half the floorboards in Ginny's room looking for whatever it was they had stashed there. Ginny herself was nowhere to be seen.

Ron and Harry moved down to the kitchen, where it was warmer, and set up Ron's chess set on the kitchen table to play for a while, Ron beating Harry easily every game. Eventually Hermione reappeared with four books under her arms and set up next to them, pouring over the texts as though she would find the answers to all the world's problems in their pages.

Harry leaned forward over the chessboard, contemplating his next move and trying to keep his mind only on the little black and white pieces in front of him, when he noticed that Ron was giving him a strange look.

"What?" he asked, still scrutinizing the board. "Am I walking into some sort of trap you've laid me?"

"What's that thing you're wearing?" Ron replied. Harry looked down to see his amulet hanging out of his shirt like a pendulum over the board. His first reaction was to stuff it back into his shirt and pretend that it was nothing, but he remembered what Ron had said about not having secrets from one another any more and sighed inwardly.

"It was my dad's," he explained, holding out the chain so that Ron could get a better look. "Remus gave it to me for my birthday. He and..." Harry swallowed hard. "He and Sirius wanted me to have it."

Ron looked away from the amulet with a sympathetic expression, and Harry realized that he hadn't said Sirius' name aloud to Ron or Hermione since... Well, since last May. Ron quickly shifted his gaze back down to the little gold amulet.

"What's all that funny writing on it?" he asked, gesturing towards the markings on the amulet.

"What funny writing?" Hermione asked, looking up from her book.

"I think they're runes," Harry said, holding the amulet out again, this time so that Hermione could get a look at it. "Professor Lindell said she thought it was a puzzle."

Hermione nodded. "They're runes all right." She looked thoughtful for a moment. "I could translate it for you, if you like. Then maybe we could solve the puzzle."

"What happens if we solve it?" Ron asked.

Harry shrugged. "Probably nothing. Professor Lindell thought it was a speliquary -- something to keep spells in -- but she said that since it hasn't done anything magical so far, it's probably empty."

"Still," Hermione said. "It might be nice to know what it says..."

Harry thought about it. He had no idea what kind of spells it could be used to hold, but if he could unlock it and store one in it -- something powerful, like a Patronus, or a shield charm -- it might come in handy. Slowly he nodded and drew the chain up over his head.

"I'll just copy them down and you can have it back," she said with a kind smile. Harry nodded, softly fingering the place on his neck where the chain usually sat, and watched it in Hermione's

hands. Hermione quickly grabbed her quill and a spare bit of parchment and began copying down the symbols.

"You're in a right mess, you know," Ron said with a grin. "You've already lost one knight, and your other one isn't in a very good position."

"Thanks," Harry grumbled. "I hadn't noticed."

"You could still win though," Ron mused, examining the chessboard with a practiced eye. "You'll just have to pick your moves very carefully..."

"This is interesting," Hermione said, turning the amulet over in her hands. "I recognize a few of the ones on this side, but this other side..."

"What do you mean?" Harry asked.

"Well, the runes I know about are part of a pictorial language. This one, for instance, means 'lion'. And this one is 'to bind.' Most of these others are familiar, I'd just have to look up their exact meaning."

She flipped the amulet over then. "But on this side, I don't recognize any of the symbols."

"Maybe you haven't learned those words yet," Ron said with a shrug.

Hermione shook her head. "I don't think they're words at all." She handed the amulet back to Harry, who gratefully slid it back over his head and tucked it into his shirt.

Remus wandered in then, a steaming mug of tea in one hand and a book in the other. He smiled at them, pulling out a chair next to Harry.

"Hello Professor," Hermione said pleasantly. "Are you still enjoying your holiday?"

"I'm having trouble getting used to all this luxury," he said with a smile.

Ron made a face. "Luxury? Lithuania must really be bad."

Remus laughed. "Well," he said thoughtfully, stirring his tea.

Before he could finish his thought, however, the fire in the Weasleys' enormous hearth cracked loudly and turned green. All four of them turned to look as Mr. Weasley's head appeared among the flames.

"Hi Dad," Ron said, getting up from the table and kneeling down on the hearthstones.

"Ron," Mr. Weasley said, his voice sounding grave, "go get Remus and your mother right now."

"I'm here," Remus said, hurrying over to crouch next to Ron.

"What's up, Dad?" Ron asked.

"Go, Ron! Fetch your mother!"

Ron nodded and jumped to his feet, dashing out of the kitchen. Hermione and Harry exchanged wary looks.

"What is it, Arthur?" Remus asked. His voice was calm but serious.

"The raid went badly. We just got word. They knew we were coming."

"What? How?"

Mr. Weasley shook his head, which was an odd thing to watch when it wasn't attached to his body. "I don't have all the details. Kingsley just flooed. There's someone down. He said they could use some extra wands, if you're up for it."

"Of course," Remus answered promptly.

"Arthur?" Mrs. Weasely came hurrying into the room with Ron directly on her heels. "What is it?"

"Molly, the raid went badly. Kingsley said that Dumbledore wants the children back at school right away. He's set it up so that they can Floo securely to Gryffindor Tower in ten minutes time."

"No!" Harry said, getting up and heading for the fireplace. "We can help. I want to--"

"This isn't up for debate," Remus said firmly. "You're to go back to school. Ten minutes. Gather your things." Harry stared at him. His tone was harsh and firm, and his eyes were hard. Harry was forcibly reminded of the only other time he'd seen Remus angry with him, when he'd found Harry sneaking into Hogsmeade with the Marauder's Map in his third year.

Harry shut his mouth, but scowled blackly.

"...just get them packed," Mrs. Weasley was saying.

"There's no time," Mr. Weasley urged. "Dumbledore was adamant that they get back to Hogwarts as soon as possible. All of them. We'll send their things along later."

"All right," Mrs. Weasley said, sounding worried. "Ron, go find your sister."

"But Mum--"

"NOW, Ron!"

Ron turned quickly on his heel and headed back out of the kitchen. Harry turned and saw Hermione quickly putting the chess pieces back into their box and gathering her books and papers together.

"You can Apparate to my office once the kids have gone," Mr. Weasley was saying to Remus. "Molly, I'll send word if we need you, or if I hear anything else."

Harry blinked. If they needed her? He'd never pictured Mrs. Weasley in a fight, and he realized with a cold shock that if Mr. Weasley was even considering calling on his wife, whatever had happened must have been pretty bad.

With a pop and another flash of green light, Mr. Weasley's head disappeared from the fireplace. Remus was consulting his pocket watch.

"Right," he said briskly. "Four minutes. Grab your cloak, Harry."

Harry scowled as he turned to fetch his cloak from the hook by the door. Why was he being sent back to school all of the sudden? Dumbledore might have *said* all of them, but Harry knew that he really meant him.

"Two minutes," Remus barked. "Where's Ron?"

Ron reappeared moments later with a very stunned looking Ginny in tow. Harry noticed that her eyes were red rimmed, and he looked quickly away.

"Right, that's it," Remus said, snapping his pocket watch shut. "You first, Harry."

Remus gave him a stern look and Harry frowned. He reached into the pot of Floo powder that Remus was holding out for him and grabbed a handful.

"Remus--

"Now Harry!"

Harry scowled. He tossed the powder into the fire and stepped into the green flames.

"Gryffindor Tower!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT: Reunions

Gryffindor Tower was not a very pleasant place to be for the remainder of the Christmas holiday. The fireplace was empty, the post owls infuriatingly absent, and Harry's mirror from Remus ominously silent. A letter from Ron's parents arrived on the second day, but it contained only empty words of consolation and promises of lost socks to be sent soon.

Harry promptly tore the letter up and fed it to the fire. With Ron's full permission, of course.

Harry and Ron played a lot of chess silently in front of the fire while Hermione was buried in her books, often glancing more at the boys than at the words in front of her, and Ginny was off on her own much of the time. Nothing changed the following day, or the next, or the one after that. Mostly Ron won at chess, but he did not keep count of their games. The pieces began to grumble and rub sore shoulders every time they were set on the board. Harry and Ron did not notice.

The very stones of Gryffindor Tower were holding their breath, waiting. When the other students returned at the end of the week, their hellos and holiday greetings were answered in monosyllables. Seamus made the mistake of asking Hermione what she could possibly be working on. She mumbled something about Arithmancy and logical conundrums, and he gave up and walked away. Dean asked after Ginny, but Ron only shrugged noncommittally; no one really saw her until the first day of classes. Neville went from one to the other, trying to figure out what had happened. The strange thing was that the four of them seemed to be avoiding one another, yet none of them seemed to be fighting...

In addition, whenever anyone tried to sit near the fireplace in Gryffindor Tower, Harry and Ron would glare as angrily as their chessmen until the offender got up and moved, and every morning when the post came, they scanned the ceiling, watching the owls delivering the letters to their intended recipients. It was almost as though the boys were expecting something.

The first day of classes dawned grey and rainy. Ron and Harry were hunched over their bowls of porridge when Hermione entered the hall, heavily laden with her books.

"Still no word," Harry said sullenly before Hermione even asked. Hermione dropped down onto the bench without a word and pushed a sheet of parchment across the table to him.

"What's this?" Harry asked, glancing down at Hermione's tidy script.

"Well," Hermione said, "it's half of your amulet. The half I understand."

Harry raised an eyebrow as he started to read. *"What is sweeter than honey, what fiercer than lions? What binds us together, both pauper and scion? A bond that's eternal when freely bestowed. A harvest more plentifully reaped than when sowed."*

"Oh good," Ron snorted. "I thought it was going to be something silly."

Hermione made a face at him. "It's a riddle you idiot."

"But what does it mean?" Harry asked. He thought back to the Sphinx in the maze during the Tri-Wizard Tournament. Her riddle had been hard, but it had seemed a lot more straightforward than this one.

"Perhaps you should ask Gwyn," Hermione said pointedly. Harry turned in his seat and saw Gwyn walking into the hall with Padma and Luna. He raised his hand to wave, but Gwyn wasn't looking at him. In fact she was looking everywhere but at him. Padma glanced over and gave him a little half smile. Luna was staring at the ceiling looking every bit as vague as always.

"Go and talk to her," Hermione pressed. "You haven't talked to her all holiday."

Harry swallowed audibly. He hadn't written to Gwyn even once over the holiday, even though he'd promised to. Smiling wanly at Ron and Hermione he stood and walked heavily towards the Ravenclaw table.

Gwyn was sitting with her back towards him. Her hair seemed longer; the blonde curls hung prettily against her black school robes. Harry noticed that the pink streak was gone.

Padma was giving him a rather bug-eyed look, trying to tell him something. He smiled at her uncertainly as he approached the table.

"Hullo Gwyn," he said cheerfully as he slid into the seat next to her. "Have a good holiday? How was London?"

"Pass the salt, would you Luna?"

Harry blinked at her. "What's the matter with you?" he asked.

"Nothing," she answered coolly. "I just don't see why I should speak to you."

Harry glanced across the table at Padma who was avoiding his gaze, and at Luna, who was humming to herself, having made no move towards the salt.

"Er, possibly because you missed me and we haven't spoken in more than a fortnight?" he ventured, still trying to steady the pounding in his chest, though he was becoming more and more certain that he'd made a terrible mistake.

Gwyn finally turned and studied him with an icy gaze. "And whose fault is that?" she demanded. Harry's stomach turned. He had a strong suspicion that whatever he came up with would not be the correct answer.

"Well," he said very carefully. "Plans changed at the last minute and we went to the Burrow for Christmas--"

"And they don't have pen and paper at the Burrow?" Gwyn continued in the same dangerous calm. Harry frowned.

"Well, you didn't write to me either," he said defensively. Gwyn raised her eyebrows at him. She bent under the table, dug around in her bag and produced two thick letters which she unceremoniously threw at Harry. "It's hard to deliver something to Harry Potter, care of Hogwarts when Harry Potter isn't actually at Hogwarts."

Harry felt his face begin to burn uncomfortably and he shifted in his seat, desperately trying to think of something that would satisfy Gwyn.

"In any case," Gwyn continued, finally looking away from him and concentrating on her breakfast, "I certainly hope the two of you had a good time together while I was sitting all alone with nothing to do in my dad's flat in London."

"The two of us?" Harry said without thinking.

Gwyn looked back at him sharply. "You and Ron. Or am I mistaken in my math as well?"

"Oh. Right." Harry quickly looked away.

"Why?" Gwyn asked suspiciously. "Who else was there?"

"Oh," Harry said quickly, trying to force a light tone. "Well, loads of people. Ron has a huge family you know. There was Ginny, and Ron's brothers, and Remus showed up. And Hermione and her parents came too."

"I thought she was going home for Christmas!"

"She was. Like I said, plans changed and she stayed here with me."

Harry chanced a nervous glance at Gwyn. He wasn't exactly sure what he was afraid of; only, he didn't want her to yell, or cry, or make a scene. Especially not in front of all these people. In the chaos of the Burrow, he'd completely forgotten to write to her, and he had no better excuse than that.

"You and she stayed here -- together -- ALONE?" Padma asked incredulously.

Harry winced at her. "Well when you say it like that..."

"Like what, Harry?" Gwyn asked placidly. "Like the truth?"

Harry frowned angrily. "Nothing happened over the Christmas holidays, OK? Nothing... er..."

Gwyn turned very slowly to look at him. Harry wondered vaguely what sort of death she was plotting for him.

"What didn't happen?" she asked, her voice low and unsteady. He couldn't meet her wide eyes, and so turned to Padma.

"Nothing," he said quickly. "I mean..." He glared at her for want of anything more to say.

"Tell me the truth, Harry," Gwyn said. The anger seemed to have drained out of her voice and had been replaced by something unexpected: fear.

"Honestly," Harry said in what he hoped was a soothing tone. "It was nothing." But one look in Gwyn's huge blue eyes and he knew he was going to tell her everything. He sighed deeply.

"Fred and George put up this stupid charmed mistletoe that would get you stuck if you stood under it for too long and I got stuck and couldn't get away without getting a kiss."

Padma gasped dramatically, but Gwyn didn't make a sound. She was just watching him. Suddenly, Luna giggled.

"Did Ronald have to kiss you, or Hermione?" she asked. Harry hadn't even realized that she was paying attention to the conversation.

"Er... Neither," he replied sheepishly. "It was Ginny."

All three of them stared at him and then Padma shifted her gaze over Harry's shoulder towards the Gryffindor table and Luna followed suit. Very slowly, Gwyn turned in her seat. Harry was certain he knew what, or rather who, they were looking at. He silently groaned and followed their gazes.

Sitting off by herself at the Gryffindor table, Ginny was halfheartedly poking at her breakfast, her head resting on one hand, her long burnished hair hanging down in a straight curtain, her

expression blank as she stared at the wall behind them. When she noticed them all looking at her, however, she blushed brilliantly red and bent her head to study her porridge.

Abruptly, Gwyn grabbed her bag out from under the table and got to her feet. "I'll see you in class," she said, obviously speaking to Padma and *not* to Harry, before rushing for the door.

"Oh dear," Luna said sadly. "I think we upset her."

"It was no big deal!" Harry exclaimed, looking to Padma for support. "She was just--"

"Kissing you?" Padma offered disdainfully. She sniffed and began stirring her porridge. "Really Harry. You're a clever enough person. Couldn't you have found another way out?"

"Couldn't you have kept your mouth shut?" Harry snapped, getting to his feet. "Some friend you are!"

"Some boyfriend you are," Padma retorted angrily.

The grey weather and Harry's mood persisted throughout the week. His lessons were just as he had left them: difficult and demanding. Professor McGonagall began teaching the sixth years' extensive human transfigurations, and she looked ever so slightly relieved after Harry and Ron paired up yet again, but spent the hour laughing rather than blasting spells at each other. Professor Lindell had begun lecturing on the craft of writing original spells, which excited Hermione so much that she was practically unbearable to be around; and Hagrid worried them all by giving actual notes and homework on a singularly disturbing topic: the chimera.

"Is this your doing, Hermione?" Ron asked as they sat around the fire on Thursday night, persuading their copies of *A Monster Book of Monsters* to sit still while they paged through them looking for what Hagrid had called "useful bits o' information" on chimeras.

"Not at all," Hermione said earnestly. "Though I can't say I'm unhappy that Hagrid's finally decided to take my advice about proper lesson plans after all this time."

"OK, what do we know?" Harry asked around a yawn.

"Chimeras are bloody ugly brutes," Ron answered promptly. "Head of a lion, body of a goat, and a nasty looking serpent for a tail." He smirked. "Real hit with the ladies, they are. Not unlike someone else I know."

"Shut up, Ron," Harry growled.

"Has she spoken to you yet?" Hermione asked sympathetically. Harry shook his head wordlessly. Gwyn had barely even looked at him, let alone said anything.

"I really think it might help if I had a word with her," Hermione insisted.

"Forget it, Hermione," Harry said a bit more fiercely than he'd intended. "It won't do any good. Can we just get back to work?" Hermione frowned but held her tongue as they silently skimmed through their books for a few moments more.

"*Chimeras are highly volatile creatures and known for their unpredictable temperaments,*" Ron read aloud. "They're quite like girls in that regard, wouldn't you say, Harry?" He laughed at his own joke.

"Think that's funny, do you?" Harry demanded hotly. "Laugh all you want. What if she wasn't jealous of Hermione at all? What if I told you that she's really annoyed because I kissed your sister?"

Ron's smile slipped off of his face as abruptly as though he'd stepped on a patch of black ice. "What?"

"You kissed Ginny?" Hermione blurted.

Harry rolled his eyes at her. "Why don't you tell the whole house, then!" He sighed and looked resigned. "Yes I did, but it was an accident, really."

"What?" Ron squawked again, his eyebrows shooting up into his hair.

"It was only to get me out from under that stupid mistletoe!" Harry insisted. "Really that's all."

"Did you tell Gwyn that?" Hermione asked.

"Of course I did," Harry snapped. "I'm not a complete idiot."

Hermione gave him a doubtful look, but let the comment slide. "Well, hopefully she'll be reasonable and get over it before too much longer."

Harry sighed deeply. "I think I was better off stuck."

Wisely, Ron chose not to comment on that. The three of them quietly returned to looking through their books.

"You don't suppose Hagrid has an *actual* chimera, do you?" Hermione asked tentatively after a while.

"Harry?"

Harry glanced up, startled by the new voice. "Remus?" he called eagerly, glancing into the fireplace, expecting to see Remus' head nestled calmly amongst the flames.

"Over here, Harry."

Harry swung around and saw Remus and Professor McGonagall striding towards them across the common room. The few other students still around were watching avidly as the professors headed for Harry. He jumped out of his chair and rushed to meet them.

"What's going on?" he demanded. "Who got hurt? What happened?" He heard Ron and Hermione throwing down their biting books and hurrying up behind him, eager for Remus' answers.

"Everyone is going to be alright," Remus said seriously.

"What about the rest of it?" Harry pressed. "Why hasn't anyone told us what's been going on?"

"All in good time," Remus replied. "And with fewer people around," he added in a low whisper. "I just wanted to let you know I was here. I'll be going to your Occlumency lesson with you tomorrow morning."

"To see Professor Lindell," Harry concluded.

"To observe your lesson," Remus corrected in a firm voice, but he winked at Harry as he spoke. "I'll meet you in the Entrance Hall after breakfast. OK?"

Harry nodded, and Remus smiled wearily. "It's good to see you, Harry," he said.

When you're not too busy shoving me out a Floo, Harry thought. "It's good to see you too," he said only a little grudgingly.

Remus nodded and turned to go. Professor McGonagall put her hands on her hips, glaring at Ron and Hermione.

"Enough eavesdropping!" she said firmly. "I seem to recall giving my sixth years extra reading on the difficulties associated with self-transfiguration. Don't tell me you've already finished it; I might think I haven't been giving you enough to do!"

Hermione opened her mouth to say that she had, in fact, finished it, but Ron promptly trod on her foot, smiled brilliantly at McGonagall, and dragged Hermione back towards the fire.

"I trust you will exercise some modicum of discretion, Mr. Potter, in discussing Mr. Lupin's visit," Professor McGonagall said coolly, eyeing Harry sharply as he nodded and headed back towards the fire.

That night, Harry didn't sleep well. He woke several times drenched in cold sweat, his heart pounding and his legs shaking as though he'd just been running for his life. Try as he might, however, he couldn't remember the dreams that had been driving him. The third time it happened, in the grey hours before dawn, Harry dug his Centre out of his bedside drawer and tried to calm his mind. It didn't seem to work.

The next morning, Harry fidgeted through breakfast while Ron and Hermione argued over their Transfiguration reading and the ethics of using self-transfiguration to look like someone else.

"All I'm saying," Ron said around a mouthful of toast, "is that it would be a bit of a lark to pretend to be someone else for a while. A musician maybe. Or a famous Quidditch player."

"How can you even say that?" Hermione asked. "I mean, it would be immoral to go around impersonating someone else without their knowledge!"

"Like using polyjuice Polyjuice potion to interrogate Slytherins?" Ron asked pointedly.

Hermione blushed. "That was different," she said simply. "We were doing that for a good cause."

"Oh I see," Ron said with a grin. "So impersonating someone for a good reason is OK, but just doing it for fun isn't."

"Exactly."

Harry rolled his eyes and grabbed his satchel. "I'm off," he announced. Ron waved at him dismissively.

"Be sure and tell us what happens," Hermione called after him as he approached the door.

"Ready?" Remus asked briskly as Harry approached him. He fell into step next to Harry as they headed for Professor Lindell's office.

"So what happened?" Harry pressed as soon as they were out of earshot of the few students wandering around the halls. Remus paused and walked quietly for several steps before answering.

"Nothing good," he finally replied.

Harry frowned when nothing more seemed forthcoming and watched his feet shuffling along the corridor. "You're not going to clam up, are you?" he asked. "If you stop telling me what's going on..." He left his thought unfinished. "I mean, you're all I've got," he finished lamely.

Remus looked at him sideways. "All you've got?" he repeated. "Harry, it seems to me that you've got an awful lot of people on your side."

Harry shrugged. "Not who trust me," he said flatly. Remus stopped suddenly and Harry went on several steps before realizing he'd left him behind. He turned back to look.

Remus was staring at him. "Is that what you think?" he asked quietly. "You think we don't tell you things because we don't trust you?"

Harry felt foolish saying yes, so he just shrugged again noncommittally.

Remus frowned, but not at Harry. He started walking again, catching up to Harry easily. They continued in silence; Harry could tell that Remus was thinking hard, so he did not press for more information. There would be time enough for that later.

Before Remus could say anything more, they had reached Professor Lindell's office -- Remus' old office, Harry realized, as he reached up to knock on the heavy wooden door.

Remus opened his mouth to speak, but before he had a chance, the door swung open. Professor Lindell appeared in the doorway. She blinked twice and raised one of her eyebrows at them.

"Professor Lupin, I presume?" she asked, holding out her hand as she stepped back to allow Harry and Remus to enter her office.

"Just Remus now," he responded, accepting her hand. He looked around the office wistfully as he spoke.

Professor Lindell inclined her head and gestured to a chair. "Well, come in Mr. Potter," she added. "It won't do to have you lurking in the doorway."

Feeling sheepish, Harry followed Remus to the leather wingbacks and sat in his usual chair. Professor Lindell moved around behind her desk, eyes on them at all times.

"Did you receive the package I sent you?" she asked, eyeing Harry keenly.

Harry nodded. "Yes, I..." How could he possibly thank her? He knew that she was a private person. Remus had been right when he'd said that the memory was a very personal gift. "Thank you," Harry said emphatically, willing his professor to read the meaning behind the words. She nodded once, the faintest hint of a smile playing at the corners of her lips.

"So," she began, folding her hands together on top of her desk. "To what do I owe the honor of this unexpected visit?"

"As Dumbledore may have mentioned, I'm quite keen on learning basic Occlumency," Remus began. "He suggested I observe your lessons with Harry. After all, there's only so much one can learn from a book." Remus shifted in his chair. "And he seemed to think you could help me."

Professor Lindell raised an eyebrow at him interestedly. "It seems the headmaster had quite a lot to say to you about me, and yet he's told me precious little about you." She paused, studying Remus over the tops of her glasses. "Help you with what?"

"Occlumency, of course," Remus responded immediately.

"Really?" Professor Lindell looked at him shrewdly. "Professor Dumbledore mentioned several days ago that he might be sending a friend along to discuss regenerative magic and healing potions."

Remus smiled slightly and spoke slowly, "Potions have never been my forte."

"Ah." Lindell looked thoughtful for a moment. "But why ask me? Surely Dumbledore should have sent you to see his potions prodigy down in the dungeons?"

Remus smiled wryly. "Likely he would have tried, though I doubt Professor Snape would have been very keen on helping me."

This comment merited the raising of Lindell's other eyebrow.

"The feeling is mutual, I assure you," Remus admitted blandly.

Harry looked from one to the other, feeling like the muggle at a Quidditch match.

"I like you all the more for it," Lindell replied. "And this particular branch of magic requires... something... more." She studied him for another minute. "But the headmaster was unclear as to the purpose of this project. Such a thing would be very valu--"

--would be for private use only," Remus interjected.

She nodded, eyes glazed over looking at something beyond the crowded office. Then she began to speak almost to herself. "It would have to be a combination spell -- potions, charm work, definitely requiring astronomy principles. But for a spell with almost unlimited regenerative potential, you'd have to start with a base element that already had inherent regenerative properties." She waved her hand around enumerating the possibilities. "A branch of lifewood, phoenix fire, unicorn, vampire, or werewolf blood, Elixir of Life perhaps... but none of those is legal or even possible to obtain."

Remus nodded.

Lindell rubbed her nose reflectively, then relaxed and continued. "Phoenix Fire is deadly to the touch, lifewood all but extinct, I believe I read that the only Philosopher's stone in existence was recently destroyed." She glanced at Harry. "Which leaves--"

"Blood of a unicorn, werewolf, or vampire," Remus said. "And stealing the blood of a unicorn carries an ancient curse."

Lindell shook her head. "Vampire blood is much too volatile. The last thing I need is to have half the school blown up."

"Which leaves werewolf blood," Remus said calmly. Harry turned to stare at him openly.

Professor Lindell looked at him sharply. She rose from her chair and wandered over to her cabinet where she opened the bottom half and began digging through a pile of scrolls.

"You've got my attention, Lupin," she said from within the cabinet. "Something like this would be... very interesting." A moment later she reemerged with a large scroll in hand. "Of course, you realize that Werewolf blood is a controlled substance, and that possession alone carries a mandatory six month sentence in Azkaban?" Remus nodded unconcernedly. "Therefore, I trust we are only speaking about this hypothetically," Lindell added with a sly smile.

"Of course," Remus replied.

With a flick of her wand, Lindell sent the scroll she had retrieved across the room to the only bare spot of wall, unrolled it, and stuck it to the stones. The parchment was covered in a complex series of runes and symbols that Harry didn't recognize at all. It looked as though one of Hermione's Arithmancy textbooks had exploded all over the page.

Remus turned in his chair to look at the parchment as Lindell studied it with her back to them. "It wouldn't be easy," she said at last, tapping the parchment with her wand and shifting a few of the equations as though they were pieces of a puzzle. "That kind of spell would require a strong recompense to counteract the malignancy inherent in the Werewolf magic."

"An infusion of aconite, perhaps?" Remus said, standing as well and walking over to the parchment.

Lindell gave him a sharp look. "You've done your research," she said. "Yes. That might work. Of course, you'd have to factor in the temporal aspect..."

"Working *with* the lunar influence, rather than against it."

"And it would need something... Something to isolate the healing properties." Lindell rearranged another few equations and then tapped her lips thoughtfully with the tip of her wand. "But it could work," she pronounced finally.

"Well," Remus said, slipping his hands into his pockets, "if anyone could make it work, I'm inclined to think you could. Dumbledore was right to send me to you."

Lindell shrugged modestly. "It's a moot point. We would need the blood as a starting point, and you hardly seem the type to be running around buying illegal substances on the black market."

"I have a source," Remus said evenly. He was awfully good at this, Harry mused; he had to be.

Lindell arched her eyebrow at him. "You're positively full of surprises, aren't you, Mr. Lupin?" Remus stared back at her impassively.

"I'll think about it," Lindell announced finally. "But for now, I think we've taken up far too much of Mr. Potter's lesson time with speculation and fancy. After all," she said, glancing at Remus sideways, "you *did* come to observe our Occlumency lesson, did you not?"

Remus nodded and sat back in his chair. Lindell studied him for a moment more before shifting her attention to Harry.

"Right then, Mr. Potter," she said briskly, drawing her wand out once again. "Let's show Mr. Lupin what he came for. Clear your mind, please."

Harry instinctively closed his eyes and pictured his Centre. He'd been practicing lately without the aid of the crystal physically present, and had been doing quite well.

"*Legilimens*," he head Professor Lindell say. The familiar rush of memories crashed over him, and he struggled to remain in control. Images flashed at him so quickly that he could barely even recognize them. He tried to concentrate on the little ball of smoke deep in the heart of the Centre in his mind, but something was poking at it, prodding it outwards, pushing against him.

Suddenly, a memory leapt to the fore. There was a round room, dark and mysterious, with a raised dais in the center, on which an archway sat, a wispy veil fluttering in the oppressive stillness of the room. Harry recognized it at once, and recoiled from the image, fighting against it, fighting to regain control.

But the memory pushed harder. Suddenly, in the grey darkness, a pale hand reached out from behind the veil. The fingers reached, tendons flexing desperately, grasping for something, anything to pull it free from the veil. Harry's breath caught and he felt himself slowly relinquishing control, ceasing to struggle as he was overcome with horror.

A second figure emerged from the darkness of the room, striding purposefully up to the dais. The figure was cloaked and hooded, swathed in shadow, but Harry did not need to see his face to recognize him. His scar burned painfully as Voldemort walked calmly up to the arch, extended an arm, and sent the outstretched hand falling back beyond the veil.

"SIRIUS!" Harry screamed. He tried to move, to run towards them, to reach for his wand, but he was rooted to the spot, frozen against his will. High-pitched laughter echoed through his mind as his vision went dark.

"Harry!"

The voice calling Harry back from unconsciousness sounded so familiar, hurt and hoarse. Harry wanted to tell the voice not to worry, that he was all right, and that it was peaceful where he was, when the world snapped back at him like a rubber band. He groaned and opened his eyes, reaching up to rub his burning scar.

"Harry!" Remus had left his chair and was bent over Harry's, his hands on Harry's shoulders, shaking him gently. His face was ashen, eyes wide with concern. "Harry, are you alright?"

"Yeah," Harry replied groggily. "Yeah, I think so." He blinked several times, trying to clear his head before glancing across the desk at Professor Lindell. Her face was absolutely white, her grey eyes wide and horrified.

"What was that?" she asked, her voice shaking ever so slightly. "Have you... Have you been in that room?"

"It was..." Harry fought to place the images he had seen. "It was a dream," he said as he realized it. "A nightmare I had last night." He glanced back at Remus. "Just a dream."

"Just a dream?" Remus repeated, staring at him intently. "Or a dream from Voldemort?"

Harry opened his mouth and then closed it again. It *could* have been from Voldemort. He couldn't be sure.

Lindell took a deep breath as though to steady herself. "Mr. Potter," she said, regaining some of her usual composure, "as I understand it, the very purpose of this exercise is to prevent you from having these... disturbing dreams. Have you been practicing clearing your mind at night?"

"Yes," Harry said wearily, "but it doesn't always work." He sighed. Memories of the nightmares were now fresh in his mind, and he was reliving the helplessness he'd experienced over and over again alone in the dark. "Once I get into the dream, it's like all my practice was for nothing," he said, trying to explain. "I don't even remember that I *know* Occlumency, let alone how to do it..."

"You've been showing such progress in our lessons..." Lindell said, frowning. "Tell me: the last time I was able to break into your mind, had you been having strange dreams the night before?"

Harry thought back, trying to remember. Oddly enough, he remembered that the last time Lindell had been able to get to him like this was the day he had practiced his Legilimency with Gwyn. The same day he'd had the very strange dream about Sirius and himself as a baby. He nodded, brow furrowing in thought. But surely that one couldn't have been from Voldemort as well...

"The dreams weaken his defenses," Remus said quietly.

"Then we'll simply have to change our strategy," Professor Lindell replied briskly. "I think that should be all for the day, Mr. Potter." She looked at him empathetically. "You look done in."

Harry nodded, gratefully, feeling his sleepless night catching up to him quickly, and he stood to go.

"Get some rest, Harry," Remus said quietly. He still looked deeply shaken and passed a hand over his face. "I'll see you later tonight."

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE: Unanswered Questions

Harry didn't sleep, though he knew he ought to. The dormitory was too cold, too silent, too empty, and he left it almost as soon as he'd returned, walking down to the near empty common room, where Ron was busy working at one of the tables.

"All right there, Harry?" he asked as Harry stalked over to the sofa and sprawled onto it.

"Not really," Harry replied in an exhausted monotone.

"Rough lesson?" Ron asked.

Harry shrugged.

Ron glanced up at him. "Wanna talk about it?"

Where to start? Harry wondered. Lupin didn't tell me anything I wanted to know, he and Lindell could have been speaking in code for all I understood of their conversation and -- oh yeah -- I'm having bloody scary nightmares again...

"No," he replied tersely.

Ron looked skeptical, but didn't press and Harry lay down on the sofa, staring. He wanted nothing more than to be able to fall back onto the squashy cushions, close his eyes, and drift off into that peaceful blank oblivion of unconsciousness. The only problem was that he was afraid that it would be neither peaceful, nor blank. And being afraid of his own mind made him angry.

Exhaustion eventually overwhelmed him, but just as Harry was beginning to doze, the portrait creaked open and Hermione climbed through

"Look who I found," she said brightly.

Following her, Remus entered the common room. "You'd think the Fat Lady would remember me," Remus said in a slightly indignant tone. "Just because I didn't know the *exact* password..." he smiled, but his smile faded as he saw the look on Harry's face. "How are you feeling, Harry?" he asked, his pleasant expression slipping seamlessly into one of concern.

"I'm okay," Harry replied sitting up on the sofa, "but I'll be better once you tell us what's been going on."

Remus glanced uncertainly at Ron, who was hurrying over, and at Hermione, making herself comfortable in a nearby armchair. Harry gave Remus a significant look. "I'm just going to tell them anyway," he said.

Remus smiled wryly. "Very well. But this isn't for public knowledge, you three, so keep it under your hats, alright?"

Ron nodded enthusiastically as he perched on the arm of Hermione's armchair.

"The raid was on the Malfoy manor," Remus began. "Narcissa was seen in Knockturn Alley buying illegal Dark Artifacts. The area was being watched after you were attacked, Harry. Kingsley and some of the other Aurors obtained permission to search the Malfoy estates. It went... badly." Remus paused, glancing from Harry over to Ron and Hermione.

"The Aurors had been watching the Malfoy manor for some time and reported the comings and goings of quite a few suspected Death Eaters at regular intervals. Kingsley planned the raid to coincide with the day of the next suspected meeting."

"Which was a bad idea?" Hermione volunteered.

Remus nodded. "They were ready," he said dully. "We can only guess that they knew in advance of the Aurors' plans."

"Who got hurt?" asked Harry in a strained voice.

Remus turned back to look at him. "Several people received minor injuries, but it was Tonks who was hurt most severely. Crucius curse. Malfoy was on her for at least a minute before anyone could stop him."

"Has he been arrested?" Hermione demanded. "There hasn't been anything about it in the papers!"

"He was taken in and is being held 'for questioning'," Remus replied. "The Ministry is still hushing it all up. Fudge owes Malfoy a few too many favors..."

"But Tonks," Harry pressed, "she's going to be okay, isn't she?"

Remus smiled. "She'll be fine, but she's off active duty for at least a few months. The spell caused some nerve damage. Hasn't dampened her spirit though. She tried to beat Kingsley about the head with her cane when he went to tell her she'd been put on medical suspension. They released her from St. Mungo's a few days ago."

Harry let out a long breath, unaware that he'd even been holding it. He tried to picture the vivacious young Auror he knew lying in a hospital bed and found his mind couldn't quite make the leap.

"And the Sect?" he asked, voicing the other question that he'd been burning to ask since Remus had arrived. "That is what you were here to see Professor Lindell about, isn't it?"

Remus smiled at him. "Nothing gets by you, Harry. Yes, that's why I was here to see Professor Lindell." He stood abruptly, dusting his hands on his pants. "I've got a room in Hogsmeade for a few weeks if you need me for anything," he said. "Maybe I can even catch a Quidditch match while I'm here. Oh! That reminds me..." He began digging into one of his pockets and produced a small, dark blue vial with a note attached.

"Fred and George asked me to give this to you, Ron," Remus said, handing the vial across. "Said they didn't trust it to the post. Well, I've got to visit the Headmaster before I go, Harry, but I don't doubt I'll see you again soon."

Harry nodded dumbly as Remus stood, smiled uncertainly at Harry, and headed out of the tower. He clenched his jaw, trying to swallow the anger rising in his throat. Remus seemed determined not to tell him anything about... anything these days.

"What is it, Ron?" Hermione asked, trying to peer around Ron's elbows as he read the note from his brothers.

"Brilliant!" Ron crowed, hopping up off of the armchair and over to sit next to Harry. "This is bloody brilliant! I thought they'd forgotten."

"Forgotten what?" Harry asked, tearing his gaze away from the closed portrait door.

"Well, after you told me what happened to Gwyn, I *knew* we just had to figure out a good way to get back at Malfoy, so I er... special ordered something from Fred and George."

Harry stared at him. "You didn't tell them what happened, did you? I swore you to secrecy!"

Ron shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "No! Well, not as such, anyway. I only told them that Malfoy had done something awful and that we needed to get back at him but good."

Harry sighed, envisioning Gwyn's fury if she ever found out that he'd told Ron and Hermione -- and apparently the twins, by proxy -- about what Malfoy had done.

"Alright, so what is it then?" he asked. Since they already knew, it might be worthwhile to see what the twins had sent.

Ron frowned at the note again. "Dunno," he said at last. "They don't say specifically what it does, but they do say it'll be brilliant and not to be too close by when it takes effect." He held out the little blue vial for Harry, who took it, turning it over in his hands and watching the liquid slosh around inside.

"I don't know about this," Hermione said skeptically.

"An eye for an eye, Hermione," Ron said with a disdainful shake of his head.

"You don't even know what it does!" she countered. "How is that an eye for an eye?"

"I'll think about it," Harry said, interrupting the argument before it had a chance to escalate. Hermione harrumphed and sat back in her armchair, bringing her book up to her face. Ron stuck his tongue out at Hermione and rolled his eyes at Harry.

Harry stretched out on the sofa again, his anger still smoldering under the surface. What exactly was everyone playing at, telling him one minute that he ought to know everything, and then casually neglecting to tell him anything. He closed his eyes, trying to process the day, and all that had happened.

When he opened them again, the shadows in the room were long, the only light the golden flickering of the fire, and there was a warm weight next to his feet. He raised his head and saw Ginny sitting there, watching him..

"Urg," Harry grunted, pushing himself up into a sitting position. "How long have I been asleep?" he asked. His stomach growled noisily now that it realized the rest of him was awake to listen.

Ginny shrugged. "Dinner's already started," she said, "and you missed lunch."

"Yeah," Harry replied, rubbing his stomach. Ginny smiled slightly. "Thanks for waking me up."

"Actually," she added, turning and looking into the newly-lit fire, "there's something I've been meaning to talk to you about."

Harry adjusted his glasses on the bridge of his nose and willed himself to be alert, but Ginny didn't immediately continue. "Everything okay?" he asked after a few moments of silence.

"I... I don't know," she answered quietly. "Okay, I'm just going to tell you, but you have to swear on your Firebolt that you won't laugh or anything."

"Why would I laugh?" Harry asked.

Ginny narrowed her eyes at him. "Just swear."

"Okay! Okay, I swear."

Ginny took a deep breath, still eyeing him as though she were looking for any sign of an errant giggle. "I think... I think I had a vision."

Harry stared at her. "A what?"

"You promised you wouldn't laugh!" Ginny said defensively.

"Who's laughing?" Harry quipped.

Ginny got up and started pacing, her hands clasped firmly behind her back.

"So, are you going to tell me about it?" Harry prompted.

Ginny sighed and paused, putting her face in her hands and rubbing her eyes. "It all sounds so stupid when I say it out loud..." she began. "I was in Divination, just before the Christmas hols, and Firenze was teaching us about fire scrying. So we're all staring at this fire, and all I could think of was how stupid it was, and how I wished the lesson were over, when all of the sudden, there were *shapes* in the *smoke*."

She started pacing again, wringing her hands in the fabric of her robes a gesture that reminded Harry of Mrs. Weasley when she was anxious. "And they weren't just any shapes either. I saw..." She paused again and looked directly at him. "I saw you, Harry."

Harry shifted uncomfortably in her intense gaze.

"I saw you with that memory box from Professor Lindell, and I felt -- well, to tell you the truth, I felt terrible! I got all sad and anxious and twisted up inside. And then," she shrugged. "Then it was gone.

"I thought at first that I'd fallen asleep, because that's how I felt when it was over, like I'd just woken up from a dream. And then you showed up at our house with that box, and I got scared again, but there wasn't anything wrong with the box, that time, just Professor Lindell's memory, which wasn't really bad, so I thought I'd been wrong or something."

"False alarm," Harry said, suddenly remembering the context of her words from their previous conversation.

Ginny nodded. "But then, when George opened the box in Ron's room, I just *knew*--" She broke off suddenly and plopped back down onto the sofa. "I just knew," she repeated softly.

"So, your vision came true?" Harry asked.

Ginny shook her head. "That's just it! I don't know. I suppose so. Maybe. Maybe not. Maybe it meant something else entirely." Her face fell and she hunched her shoulders sulkily. "Maybe it was just an undigested bit of lunch."

"Have you told anyone else about this?" Harry asked. Ginny shook her head again dejectedly.

"It's all so hard to believe!" she said, exasperated. "I mean, I'm not even good at Divination. I've never been able to see anything in my crystal ball, and tealeaves always just look like a soggy mess to me."

Harry could relate to that, anyway. Divination had never been anything to him but an exercise in futility and creative assignments, making up predictions and pretending to interpret his dreams. It had always seemed a load of rubbish, yet now he knew that some prophecies could be real...

"Maybe you should talk to Firenze about it, or Professor Trelawney--"

Ginny snorted and shook her head violently. "No," she said firmly. "I mean, they'd probably just give me extra homework, wouldn't they?"

"But Ginny, if you really do have a gift..."

"I don't," Ginny replied flatly. "It was a fluke. Just a coincidence. Who knows what Firenze puts in that fire anyway, know what I mean?"

She stood up abruptly and walked a few steps before turning to look at him. "I'm sorry for being such a wally. Let's just go get something to eat before Ron devours it all."

"You're not a wally," Harry retorted, getting to his feet, "but dinner sounds like an excellent idea."

They made their way down to the Great Hall in silence. Harry couldn't help but feel impressed that Ginny seemed to have had a real vision, when he himself had never been able to predict so much as the correct answers to his Divinations exams.

Ginny left him at the head of the Gryffindor table and went to sit with some of her other friends. Harry quickly made his way to where Ron and Hermione were just finishing up dinner.

"We were just wondering if you were going to make it," Ron grinned as Harry took his seat. "Hermione was debating calling off the DA meeting."

Harry shook his head vehemently as he loaded up his plate. "No. The meetings are too important. You guys should go on even if I'm not there for some reason."

"But Harry," Hermione said gently, "you're the reason we have the DA meetings."

Harry scoffed. "I thought we had the meetings to learn defense."

"Yes. From you."

Harry blinked once or twice and concentrated on finishing his dinner.

As the trio made their way up the corridor to the Room of Requirement, Harry noticed that someone was already waiting for them. When he realized who it was, he stopped dead in his tracks.

"P-Professor?" he asked, stunned.

Professor Lindell turned to look at them. Dressed in her ubiquitous navy robes, she almost melted into the shadows of the rarely used corridor.

"Mr. Potter," she replied coolly. "I was beginning to wonder whether your friend Mr. Lupin was having me on when he said that this was the place for your club meeting. Good evening Miss Granger, Mr. Weasley."

"Have you decided to observe, then, Professor?" Hermione asked in a falsely cheerful tone.

Professor Lindell inclined her head. "Mr. Lupin is of the opinion that it will be worth my while," she said. "But not to worry; I don't intend to interfere."

Harry nodded and proceeded to walk back and forth in front of the wall, thinking about the DA's meeting room, trying to ignore Professor Lindell's questioning gaze and raised eyebrows. On the third turn, the door appeared, and Harry held it open for her.

"Extraordinary!" Lindell said quietly as she entered the room. "What an ingenious use of a concealment charm. How did you find this place?"

Harry shrugged. "Er... Professor Dumbledore told me about it," he said uncomfortably.

"It's not only a concealment charm, Professor," Hermione added enthusiastically. "It's got to be a good deal more than that; the room provides whatever it is you need."

Harry left Hermione and Professor Lindell speculating on the spell structure of the room as he straightened the dark detectors on the table, pulled some books off of the shelves only to replace them, took the cushions out of the cupboard, put them back again, and so on. Ron sidled over to him as a few people began arriving.

"Are you sure you're up for this, mate?" he whispered. "'Cause it's OK if you're not."

"I'm fine," Harry said dully.

"Hi Harry," Neville said coming up to them. "Hi Ron. Listen, Harry; Phoebe, Mo and Natalie are still having trouble with stunning, so I thought Luna and I could work with them separately tonight, if that's OK with you."

"Yeah sure," Harry replied distractedly, glancing quickly at Professor Lindell, who was watching him intently from the other side of the room. "That sounds good."

Harry looked around and saw that most of the group had already arrived. Professor Lindell was looking around at each student in turn. Harry cleared his throat, and the whole lot of them went silent. He suddenly felt unusually self-conscious. "We're going to continue with healing charms tonight," he said, "so anyone interested in that can go with Hermione. Neville and Luna are going

to be practicing *Stupefy*, so anyone who wants to join can practice with them, and the rest of you will be dueling with me."

The students quickly started talking as they broke up into their groups. Hermione, Padma, and a few of the others sat down in a corner with Hermione's books on first aid, Neville and Luna got out some cushions for their remedial stunning, but the vast majority of the students crowded around Harry.

"Pair up," he instructed them, and they quickly did so, partners bowing to each other as around them spells began to fly.

Harry walked between the pairs, trying not to look at Professor Lindell, who was sitting quietly in a corner. He passed Justin and Ernie, who were hexing one another with gusto. Ernie hit Justin with a *Tarrantallegra* jinx that sent him flying across the room, legs flailing as if independent from his body. Ernie doubled over with laughter as Justin fell over and practically kicked himself in the head.

"*Finite incantatem*," Justin muttered, ending the spell. He threw a black look at Ernie and shouted, "*Expelliarmus!*"

Ernie fell backwards onto his bum, his wand shooting out of his hand like a firecracker.

"Bad form!" he complained as he gingerly rubbed his injured pride.

Harry laughed. "You left yourself open, mate," he said good-naturedly, offering Ernie a hand up. "If he'd been a Death Eater, you'd be toast." Ernie nodded solemnly.

Harry turned away and noticed Professor Lindell looking right at him, smiling her slight half smile. She walked towards him.

"I am impressed, Mr. Potter," she said quietly as she and Harry moved towards the back of the room. "I had no idea you were attempting such advanced spells in this club." She looked at him sideways over the tops of her glasses. "You take all this rather... seriously, don't you?"

Harry shrugged. "I suppose I do," he answered slowly. "I just want them to be ready."

"Ready for what, exactly?" Professor Lindell asked sharply.

"Anything," Harry replied.

In Neville's group, Phoebe and Mo were practicing stunning one another while Luna helped Natalie with her technique. Neville was reviving each student that fell.

"*Stupify!*" Phoebe said firmly. The spell hit Mo in the chest and he toppled backwards onto the cushions they had spread over the floor.

"That's loads better," Neville said encouragingly as he woke Mo with a quick incantation.

"All right, Neville?" Harry asked. Neville grinned and gave him a thumbs-up as he helped Mo to his feet. Phoebe smiled shyly.

"It seems to me that you're concentrating on offensive spells," Professor Lindell observed.

"Er, yeah, I suppose," Harry replied. "But we've done *Protego*. What else is there?"

Lindell straightened her glasses. "Well there are other defensive spells."

"Like the shield charm you came up with?" Harry asked.

Professor Lindell smiled. "Certainly, though that's not the only one."

Harry thought for a moment. "Would you teach it to us?" he asked.

Professor Lindell looked pensive. "That wasn't part of our agreement, Mr. Potter. I'm not here to intrude, or to undermine your authority."

Harry thought about that, then shrugged. "It isn't really about who's in charge, is it? I mean, that's not the point."

"What is the point?" Lindell asked.

"They need to be able to protect themselves," Harry said simply. "Anything that will help them do that is okay with me."

Professor Lindell gave him an appraising look.

Harry slept like a rock that night, barely even making it out of bed and down to the Great Hall in time to grab a few pieces of toast before hurrying off to his lessons. In Defense Against the Dark Arts, everyone was buzzing about how they'd never known that Professor Lindell could be so cool, and about the wicked shield charm she'd taught to the DA the night before. Unfortunately, "cool" Professor Lindell didn't seem inclined to give them any less work, as she assigned them a three foot essay on spell creation, due in a week.

The weather had finally broken, so by the time Harry, Ron, and Hermione made their way down to Hagrid's hut, the sun was shining feebly through a veil of high, thin clouds that shrouded the grounds in grey light.

When they arrived at the paddock behind the hut, students had arranged themselves around the half a dozen or so fires that Hagrid had lit to keep them all warm. Most of the students were already setting out their quills and parchment in anticipation of more notes on chimeras.

The trio chose a nearby fire and Harry began fishing about in his satchel for supplies. Suddenly, Hermione grabbed his arm.

"Harry!" she hissed.

Harry looked up. Three figures were rounding the corner of Hagrid's hut: Hagrid himself, Professor Dumbledore, and Draco Malfoy.

"What is *he* doing here?" Harry whispered, glowering at Malfoy as he passed.

"Looks like he's back in the class," Hermione said in a low voice as Malfoy sat down at another fire and began taking his things out of his bag. He did not look happy.

Neither did Hagrid.

He was waving his enormous hands as he argued with Dumbledore, who was looking as placid and inscrutable as ever. Harry scowled, certain that Dumbledore was explaining to Hagrid that everyone deserves a second chance. Harry wasn't so sure he believed it.

Harry turned away from Malfoy in disgust as Gwyn appeared at the edge of the paddock. She scanned the logs and stones that had been placed around the fires, searching for an empty seat. Setting her jaw, she strode towards them.

"Hi Gwyn," Hermione said cheerfully as Gwyn sat down in an empty space next to Ron. She glanced over at Harry, then back at Hermione.

"Hello," she said in a cold tone. "I hope you don't mind me sitting here, Hermione, but there aren't any other seats." She frowned darkly in Malfoy's direction.

"At least I still rank better than him," Harry grumbled in what he hoped was a bitingly sarcastic tone.

Gwyn glanced at him expressionlessly. "Marginally," she replied.

Professor Dumbledore had disappeared back up the hill towards the castle, and Hagrid was now approaching the front of the class, casting a series of wary looks in Malfoy's general direction.

"All righ' then all righ'. Settle down you lot. Got a big surprise fer yeh today."

Harry felt Hermione stiffen next to him anxiously, and he felt his own stomach drop uncomfortably. Hagrid's idea of a big surprise was generally what other people referred to as a big disaster waiting to happen. Some of the other students also started muttering and looking around nervously.

"All righ' Tony! Bring 'im in!" Hagrid called, cupping his hands around his mouth and shouting into the woods. Everyone turned to stare, to see who on earth 'Tony' was and what in Merlin's name he was bringing.

Tony turned out to be an enormous man who very likely had a troll somewhere in his family tree. Whereas, upon first meeting, Hagrid was simply too large to be believed, Tony was too large and far, far too ugly. His forehead was Cro-Magnon in appearance, his nose the size and shape (and color) of a wizened yam, his hair like thick curls of rusty barbed wire, and his skin was thick, and dark, and leathery. Hermione and Gwyn made similar eeping noises, but it wasn't clear if they were more startled by Tony, or by what Tony was leading into Hagrid's garden.

At the end of a simple leather dog lead, was a chimera.

"Hagrid!" Hermione squeaked. "Hagrid, you *promised...*"

"Eh," Hagrid replied unconcernedly as he took a few steps towards the mythical creature sniffing his scarecrow, "I only promised yeh that I didn't have one. An' I don't! This feller's on loan."

Harry couldn't take his eyes off of the beast standing in front of them. The chimera was a deep reddish brown color from the tips of its impressive mane down to the hissing serpent at the end of its tail. It was roughly the size of a regular lion, though rather taller, and standing on what were clearly four cloven goat's hooves. It yawned impressively, showing off identical rows of sparkling feline teeth. Several of the girls in the class gasped as it growled softly and nuzzled Tony in the back. He scratched it behind the ears.

"Gather round, gather round!" Hagrid called happily, motioning the students forward. Slowly, they approached him, staying close together in a group, and keeping as much distance as possible between themselves and the chimera. Hermione had one hand pressed over her face in disbelief, and seemed to be trying to discretely behind Ron. Gwyn came up and stood next to Harry, and he tried to ignore her.

"Tony 'ere's from the magical zoo'logical gardens in Cairo," Hagrid said, beaming as he moved towards Tony and the chimera. "This is one of only four chimeras in captivity, an' 'e's a right friendly beast, ain't 'e Tony?"

Tony grunted, turned his head to one side, and spat spectacularly into Hagrid's compost.

As Hagrid lectured about the chimera, Malfoy started moving from the front of the group towards the back and off to the side. He paused momentarily near Harry and Gwyn, and Harry glared at him. "Keep moving," he growled.

Malfoy sneered at him. "Shut your trap, Potter."

"...be makin' observations," Hagrid was saying, "and fillin' up those drawings we started last lesson, a'right ye? So get to work! A chimera waits for no man, eh Tony? Ha!"

Harry dug into his satchel for the diagram of a chimera he'd been copying from the book, all the while keeping one eye on Malfoy, over on the other side of the wide circle of students that was forming -- the students giving the chimera and its handler a wide berth.

"How do you suppose he wormed his way back into this class?" Ron whispered as they perched on a fence post and pretended to work on their diagrams.

"Dunno," Harry said truthfully, angrily chewing on the end of his quill as he watched Malfoy on the other side of the paddock. "Maybe his father had something to do with it."

"But his father's in prison," Hermione whispered. "I'm sure Professor Dumbledore just decided to give him a second chance."

"Some people don't deserve second chances," Harry huffed. Suddenly, Harry pitched forward as something bumped him from behind. "OW! What the--"

"Pardon," Phillip Fontaine said, catching his own balance from where he'd tripped over a root in the soil and collided with Harry. "I wanted a better view of the creature," he explained, then shrugged apologetically as he moved off to one side. "I will try not to fall over, yes?"

Harry shrugged back and turned to say something to Hermione, but stopped when he heard Padma yelling.

"Just what do you think you're doing? Professor! Professor Hagrid!"

"What's goin' on?" Hagrid asked, breaking away from his conversation with Tony.

"Malfoy did a duplication spell on my diagram," Padma spat.

Hagrid frowned deeply as he approached Padma and Malfoy, standing together near the corner of the hut. "S'that true, Malfoy?" he demanded in a low voice.

For his part, Malfoy looked unconcerned. "Everyone else has a head start. I was only trying to catch up, as Professor Dumbledore said."

"Catching up don' mean cheating!" Hagrid countered. "I knew I oughtn't er let you back in ter this class! I--"

CRACK!

Everyone jumped and started looking around for the source of the sound. Harry scanned the rest of the class, but everyone seemed to be doing the same. Even Tony reached up and scratched his head, looking for the source of the sound, the chimera's leather lead dangling loosely from his hand.

Harry's eyes widened, and he turned his head just in time to see the beast shake its head in frustration or perhaps pain. It opened its eyes, looked directly at Gwyn across the circle, and growled.

"Get down!" Harry hissed. Next to Harry, Hermione turned her head sharply to look and barely stifled a scream. Ron's eyes went as big as an owl's when he realized what was happening, and he slowly reached out for Hermione's arm.

"Stay still!" Hagrid said suddenly. "Jus' stay still, Gwyn. He ain't interested in you, so long as you don't make no sudden moves or noises. Tony what--"

Just then, Phillip shifted his weight and snapped a twig under his foot.

The chimera's head whipped around. Tony reached out to try to grab it by its heavy collar and the lion's head roared and snapped at him. Tony overbalanced and fell backwards to the ground.

Harry barely had a moment to react as he realized what was happening. The chimera roared again and reared up on its hind goat legs, its serpent tail flicking back and forth angrily and hissing all the while. As it came down, Harry dove to his right, crashing into Phillippe and shouting "*Ulro!*" as they fell, praying that Lindell's shield charm would work in a pinch.

They hit the ground hard, Phillippe's elbow digging into Harry's ribs. Harry turned his head just in time to see two oversized goat hooves headed straight for his face, and he squeezed his eyes shut, throwing up his arms to try to deflect the blow.

But the blow never came.

After a few moments, Harry realized he was still in one piece. He lowered his arms slightly and chanced another look.

A luminescent blue bubble had appeared, surrounding him and Phillippe. On the outside of it, the chimera was still roaring -- though Harry could no longer hear it -- and bucking, kicking harmlessly at the bubble with its hind legs. Harry stared at it, fascinated and horrified all at once, trying not to think about what might happen if the shield he had conjured gave out. Beside him, Phillippe seemed to be unconscious, and on closer inspection, Harry reasoned that he might have hit his head on a large stone when Harry tackled him.

Without warning, the arm Harry was leaning on began to shake, as though it wasn't strong enough to hold him up off the ground any longer. A jolt of panic washed through him as he realized that his own energy was what was holding up the shield, and it was fading fast.

A safe distance away, Harry saw Tony and Hagrid talking to Hermione. She was white as a sheet, but she nodded, pointed her wand at the chimera, and a dim, purplish grey mist shot out of it. The mist floated across the garden towards the chimera, enveloping it.

The chimera roared again, and Harry couldn't help but be fascinated, as it was like watching a film with the sound turned off. Suddenly, the great beast sneezed. It stopped kicking at Harry and sneezed again, took a few steps, yawned, and then abruptly collapsed to the ground.

Though he was now trembling all over from the exertion of holding up the shield, Harry waited until Hagrid came rushing forward before he felt safe. He just managed to speak the incantation to lower the bubble before collapsing into a heap himself.

CHAPTER THIRTY: The New Boy

When Harry awoke, he found himself lying on freshly starched sheets in the Hospital wing. The light through the windows was very dim, and most of the lamps and fires in the ward had been lit. As he sat up and looked around for his glasses, he hoped he'd only been asleep for a few hours.

In the bed next to him, Phillippe Fontaine was lying quite still. There was a nasty cut near his hairline, and some dried blood still clung to the fine hairs at the nape of his neck. Phillippe must have hit his head on that rock when the two of them had fallen.

Near the door, a group of students was gathered around Madam Pomfrey, arguing in loud whispers

"Listen," a female voice finally exclaimed. "I've just had an express owl from my father, and he says that you have no legal right to keep us out! If he's unconscious, then we won't be bothering him anyway, will we?"

"Look!" another voice said. "He's awake!"

The whole group turned towards him, and Harry squinted at them myopically. As one, the students rushed towards him: Ron, Hermione, and Gwyn in the lead.

"Harry!" she blurted, rushing forward. "How are you feeling? Are you alright?"

"That thing didn't get you, did it Harry?" Ron asked nervously.

"No, I'm alright," Harry responded, finding his glasses at last and shoving them on his face.

"That remains to be seen," Madam Pomfrey said testily, reaching out for Harry's wrist to take his pulse. "You sustained rather severe spell drain, Mr. Potter. Do you feel weakness in any of your limbs?"

Harry shook his head. "What was that thing you did, Hermione?"

"Just a simple sleeping charm," Hermione said modestly. "Tony said it wouldn't hurt the chimera at all."

Madam Pomfrey snorted derisively. She was holding her palm out flat, balancing her wand on it, and the wand seemed to be acting like the needle of a compass. It swung from a horizontal position, almost all of the way around a semi-circle before fluctuating briefly and coming to rest. Madam Pomfrey tutted quietly to herself.

"You're still weak," she said. "So regardless of any *legal implications*," she shot a rather annoyed glance at Gwyn, whose jaw was set determinedly, "you three may only stay for a few minutes. Mr. Potter needs his rest,"

Gwyn smiled triumphantly and perched on the edge of Harry's bed. "Oh, Harry," she said kindly. "I can't believe you did that. I couldn't even scream when I saw that thing looking at me."

"Yeah," Ron said clapping Harry gingerly on the shoulder. "That was a smart thing, conjuring Lindell's shield charm like that. How did you know it would hold up?"

"I didn't," Harry said truthfully. "It was just the first thing that came to mind."

"Are you still feeling dizzy, Mr. Fontaine?" Madam Pomfrey asked, bustling over to Phillippe's bed with a smoking goblet of potion.

"Less, now," Phillippe said softly. Harry was surprised to realize that he was awake.

"Well, this should help," Madam Pomfrey replied, helping him into a sitting position and passing him the goblet. "Drink it all, and when you're feeling up to it, you may go back to your dormitory. But no strenuous activities for at least forty-eight hours, understood?" Phillippe nodded and winced at the movement.

Madam Pomfrey nodded and moved off again, shooting Gwyn another dark look as she left. Gwyn stuck her tongue out as soon as the nurse's back was turned.

"How are you feeling, Phillippe?" Hermione asked kindly, moving over to him.

"My 'ead is 'urt," he said testily as he drank the last of his potion. He turned to Harry, and Harry almost flinched at the intensity of his gaze. "If I 'ad not been pushed, I would not be 'urt, I think."

"Harry saved your life, mate!" Ron exclaimed. "That thing was headed right for you, if you hadn't noticed."

Phillipe scowled. "It should not 'ave 'appened," he said vehemently. He slammed the goblet down onto the table next to his bed and stood, swayed for a moment, and put out one hand to steady himself. Hermione reached over to help him, but he shrugged away, storming off towards the infirmary door.

"That's gratitude for you!" Ron exclaimed. "What a prat!"

"He's had a rough bad time of it here, Ron," Hermione said a bit uncertainly.

"Guys," Gwyn said suddenly, "do you think Harry and I could have a few minutes to ourselves?"

Ron looked surprised for a moment, then grinned lecherously. Hermione rolled her eyes and grabbed his elbow, dragging him to his feet. "Of course you can," she said graciously, shoving Ron towards the door. "We'll save you some dinner, okay Harry?"

Harry nodded, trying not to look at Gwyn. He wasn't sure what she was doing there, nor what she wanted to say to him. She was being awfully sweet, and the abrupt change worried him.

The moment the infirmary door closed, however, Gwyn sighed deeply.

"Harry," she said softly, "can you ever forgive me for being such a jerk?"

Harry blinked at her. "Sorry?" he said.

She glanced up at him. "It's just, I didn't know what to think when you told me about what happened -- with the mistletoe and all. I was already so mad that you'd had such a fun vacation, and mine was so awful, and then to hear that you'd spent part of yours kissing someone else..."

"It wasn't--" Harry interrupted quickly. "Ginny and I -- we're just--"

"I know," Gwyn interrupted. "I mean, I know now. Padma told me all about what happened your second year, and how Ginny had a crush on you for a while, but that now you're just friends."

Harry reeled, silently wondering if everyone in the school were as well informed as Padma about his relationship with Ginny Weasley.

Gwyn took a deep breath. "I overreacted," she said softly, "and I'm a big enough person to admit it. Especially..." Her voice trailed off.

"Especially what?" Harry prompted. Gwyn reached out and put her hand softly over his. Her skin was warm and soft, and he felt a familiar tingle run up his spine at her touch.

"Especially after I realized that you've been telling me the truth all along," she said quietly. "You really did do all the things you said you did, and you really are in danger."

Harry sighed. "Gwyn," he said, but at the same moment, Madam Pomfrey came back over.

"Mr. Potter," she said briskly, "the Headmaster has asked me to send you to his office as soon as you are rested."

"I'm feeling much better," Harry told her.

Gwyn stood up and smoothed her robes. "I'll walk with him to Professor Dumbledore's office," she said firmly, "and make sure that he doesn't overexert himself."

Harry gave Gwyn an incredulous look, and Madam Pomfrey narrowed her eyes unpleasantly. She turned to look at Harry.

"No strenuous magic for at least two days, and you're to come straight back to see me if you aren't feeling better in the morning," she cautioned. "Spell drain is not something to take lightly, do you understand, Mr. Potter?"

Harry nodded quickly and stood to follow Gwyn out of the room. Madam Pomfrey crossed her arms over her chest and huffed as they departed.

"Good evening, Harry," Professor Dumbledore said calmly as he ushered Harry into his office.
"You're feeling better, I hope?"

Harry nodded, glanced around the room, and was a little surprised to see Remus and Professor McGonagall waiting for him. He wasn't sure why Dumbledore had called them too. "I was just a little bit worn out, sir," he finally replied.

"And Mr. Fontaine?" Dumbledore continued, as he gestured for Harry to sit.

"He's okay, I think. He got a bump on the head when I knocked him over," he paused and frowned.
"He acted like I did it on purpose -- "

Dumbledore regarded him coolly. "We should try not to judge Mr. Fontaine too harshly," he said after a moment. "He is having a difficult year."

"I'm sure you can relate, Harry," Remus said softly.

Harry glanced at him curiously.

"His parents were very outspoken lobbyists with Ministère du Magique. They weren't happy with their government's policy of isolationism and wanted their Premier to join our Ministry in the fight against Voldemort," Remus explained. "They were murdered by Death Eaters, and Phillippe was sent here, to Dumbledore, that he might be better protected."

Harry didn't know what to say. He realized now why Professor Sprout had thought that he and Phillippe had a lot in common. But, whereas he had had the last six years to put his parents' murders behind him, Phillippe had had less than a year. That was bound to put anyone in a bad mood.

"Harry," Professor Dumbledore continued after a moment, "I've asked you here to discuss the events that took place earlier this afternoon."

Harry's stomach sank. "This isn't about Hagrid, is it, Professor? Only, it was an accident. He's been doing loads better. He even set us an essay last week on chimeras, and--"

Professor Dumbledore held up a hand to stop him. "This has nothing to do with Hagrid, Harry. He asked permission to bring the chimera to your lesson, and I gave it. He is not in any kind of trouble."

"We're here to talk about what happened to you, Harry," Remus said quietly, "and what we're going to do about it."

"We think we have come up with a plan," Professor McGonagall said.

Harry frowned, not sure he understood.

"Harry," Professor Dumbledore said, standing once again and moving to a side door that led off of his office, "I'd like for you to meet your new housemate, Dorian Tucker."

Harry turned to look as Dumbledore opened the door. A boy about his own age with a rather pronounced limp, leaning on a cane, stepped into the room. He had mousey brown hair, brown eyes, and a turned up button nose. He was dressed in a school uniform, but Harry had never seen him before.

"Wotcher, Harry!" the boy said in an oddly familiar voice. The boy's face began to wobble strangely. The nose stayed the same, but his features softened, his hair began to grow, and his body started to change.

Harry frowned. "Tonks?" he said uncertainly.

Tonks grinned.

"Tonks is going to live at Hogwarts for a while," Remus said laying a hand on Harry's shoulder, "to be your body guard."

"My *what*?" Harry blurted, shrugging off the hand and turning to face Remus. "I don't need a body guard!"

"I know it's a bit hard to swallow," Remus said, his expression implacably calm, "but we think it's for the best."

"For whose best?" Harry demanded. "I'm going to be the laughing stock of the school -- *again*!"

"That is why Tonks' true identity and purpose here will be kept secret," Dumbledore said firmly. "No one will know that she is anything more than a new student."

"Besides," Tonks the boy said with a familiar grin, "it'll give me something to do until I can go back to work. I've been stir crazy sitting at home. And who knows," she mused. "It might be fun to be back at school again." She glanced at Professor McGonagall. "I can do all the stuff I never would've dared to when I was here the first time around."

Professor McGonagall pressed her lips together but said nothing. She was still watching Harry.

Harry wanted to explode. "I don't need a body guard," he announced again, forcing himself to sound reasonable... "What happened earlier today was just an accident."

"It wasn't," Remus said shaking his head. "The chimera's lead was magically severed, and it was hit with a Confundus Charm to disorient and upset it. The zoo officials in Cairo are furious." He glanced at Dumbledore and then back at Harry. "We do not know who was responsible, but it was most definitely *not* an accident."

"And if you had not had the presence of mind to conjure a shield charm," Professor McGonagall added tersely, "it would have been murder."

Harry scowled. "That's rubbish," he said. McGonagall raised an eyebrow. "It can't have been meant as an attack on me," he insisted. "It went for Gwyn first. The only reason it turned is that Phillip made a noise."

"What other student would it be sent to attack?" Tonks asked. "I mean, no one else in your class is wanted, are they, Harry?"

Harry considered this. "What about Hagrid?" he asked. "What if *someone* did it to make Hagrid look bad? There are -- people -- in the class who want to see him sacked."

Professor Dumbledore folded his hands neatly on top of his desk. "Do you have a particular person in mind?" he asked.

Harry narrowed his eyes; Dumbledore knew full well who he was talking about, but he said it anyway. "Malfoy."

"Ah," Professor Dumbledore said neutrally. "But, recall, Mr. Malfoy was occupied at the time the charms were performed. He and Hagrid were discussing the matter of a copied assignment if I am not mistaken."

Harry's certainty began to slip away. How could Malfoy have cast the spells with Padma and Hagrid, not to mention most of the rest of the class, staring right at him? "He must have had an accomplice," he said aloud.

"That is a theory that merits examination," Dumbledore said equitably, "but it does not negate the fact that you have been viciously attacked twice already this year. Possibly thrice." He looked Harry

directly in the eye, and Harry had the uncomfortable impression that the Headmaster could see his every thought. He fought the urge to block his mind, reminding himself that he had nothing to hide. "Your safety is paramount, Harry," Professor Dumbledore finally said, "and we have left it to chance for far too long."

Harry hunched his shoulders, as much as admitting defeat. Tonks limped over and slung an arm around his shoulders. "It won't be so bad. It'll just be like living at headquarters, right? One big sleepover. Only with school food and lessons."

"But..." Harry's eyes opened wide. "You're a *girl*, Tonks!"

Tonks gave him a horrified look. "Who are you calling a girl?" She began to morph again, slowly changing until she again resembled a 16 year old boy. "Am I going to have to beat you up to protect my manly honor?" she demanded.

Professor McGonagall rolled her eyes. "No one is going to believe that you are a Gryffindor sixth year boy if you say things like that." She sniffed. "Do try to teach her some proper slang, Mr. Potter, or she's going to stick out like a stubbed toe." Tonks looked scandalized that McGonagall of all people should be critiquing her coolness, but wisely she said nothing. Professor McGonagall stood and straightened her robes. "If you no longer need me, Albus, I have essays to mark."

She turned to go, but paused to give Tonks one last searching look. "Curfew is still nine o'clock, *Mister Tucker*." She smiled her thin lipped smile. "I will see you in class." The rest of them watched her go.

"Mr. Tucker already knows what is expected of him, Mr. Potter," Dumbledore said as the door clicked shut. "And I think it would be best if we all became accustomed to calling him by his new name and pronoun as soon as possible." The Headmaster smiled kindly. "Perhaps you would be so good as to take our newest student down to dinner and introduce him to his classmates."

Dorian Tucker grinned excitedly around the room. Harry tried not to look as horrified as he really felt. As they turned to go, Harry caught Remus studying him. They locked eyes for a moment, and Remus opened his mouth as though there were something he wanted to say. Whatever it was, Harry didn't want to hear it. He turned away quickly and followed Dorian out of the room.

Harry sulked as the two of them walked down the corridors, Dorian's cane clicking rhythmically against the stones as he limped along slowly.

"Why Dorian?" Harry asked as he walked slowly along the corridor next to his new roommate.

The other boy shrugged. "Dad used to call me Dora. I thought I could go by Dor and it would be close enough I wouldn't get confused."

Harry nodded. "Dor, then," he said. They walked on for a few more minutes in silence.

"This is bloody well weird, you know," Dor said, grinning as they passed the Charms classroom. "It's like going back in time. It's really a unique experience."

Harry snorted. "Yeah, but I bet the novelty'll wear off the first time you find yourself doing an essay for Professor McGonagall again," he replied.

Dor turned to stare at him, horrified. "She wouldn't," he breathed.

Harry laughed.

They reached the Great Hall and Dor paused in the doorway, staring wide eyed at the four house tables teeming with rowdy students, the high table where several of their professors were chatting quietly while they ate their dinner, and up at the magically enchanted ceiling, which was currently showing an almost completely dark sky with only the faintest suggestion of moonlight shining through the clouds.

"Cor," he whispered in awe. "I'd forgotten..."

"Hey Harry," Seamus called from nearby. "Who's that with you?"

"This is Dor," Harry said, willing himself not to look guilty or embarrassed. "New student. Gryffindor. He'll be rooming with us in our dorm with us."

Seamus stood up and offered a hand to Dor, who shook it enthusiastically.

"Bloody lot shed load of new students this year, eh?" Dean said, after introducing himself. Harry laughed nervously, agreed, and quickly steered Dor down the table towards Ron and Hermione.

Ron was staring openly at Dor as he limped along between the tables. He slung his cane over the bench and then sat very carefully, gingerly lifting his injured leg over to the other side. "Wotcher, Ron," he said as he reached for the plate of chops.

Ron stared, open mouthed. "How did you--"

"'Eello Hermione," Dor continued. "Pass the potatoes, will you? Ta love."

"Erm, do I know you?" Hermione said as she passed the bowl of potatoes across.

Dor gave her an innocently surprised look. "What? Have I changed so much?" The effect, however, was spoiled as the bowl of potatoes slipped out of his hands and crashed noisily to the table. "Whoops..." Dor said quietly.

Harry sighed. "Hermione, Ron, this is Dorian Tucker, new Gryffindor," he glanced around anxiously and lowered his voice, "also sometimes known as Nymphadora Tonks."

Dor shot him a dark look. "That was below the belt, Harry. No need to go dragging my name into things."

"Tonks?" Ron exclaimed. Harry kicked him under the table. "OW! What'd you do that for?"

"Because it's a secret, you dummyspanner. Why else do you think she looks like that?"

"I don't understand," Hermione said with a shake of her head.

"I'm here to keep an eye on Harry," Dor said in a low whisper. "Dumbledore thought it would be best after the attack--"

"It wasn't an attack," Harry interjected testily.

Dor glanced over at him. "Oh, right. After Harry's close encounter of the deadly kind that most certainly wasn't possibly an attack--" he made a face at Harry "--Dumbledore thought it would be wise to have someone from the Order around him as much as possible." He smiled. "I was the natural choice, owing undoubtedly to my natural prowess on undercover jobs." He took a big bite of potatoes. "That and I'm the only one who can pass for a sixteen year old boy."

Ron was still gaping at Dor from across the table. "Wait a minute," he said suddenly. "So, you're going to be living with us then?"

Dor nodded, taking a very large bite of his dinner.

"Where though?" Ron asked. "I mean, you can't very well stay in our dormitory... can you?"

Dor grinned devilishly. "Why not?" he asked. "It's the boy's dormitory, and I'm a boy."

"But not really," Ron persisted.

"He's living with us, Ron," Harry said dejectedly pushing his carrots around on his plate.

"Don't sound so excited," Dor complained. "Look, it's going to be brilliant, right? It'll be just like this summer!"

"We didn't share a room this summer," Ron pointed out. The tips of his ears were beginning to turn pink.

Dor laughed. "Not to worry, Ron. I've no interest whatsoever in seeing you in your knickers. I'll be the heart of discretion and valor while I'm there."

"Well," Hermione said, dusting crumbs off of her hands, "I think it's an excellent idea."

"You do?" Harry gaped. He had been sure that Hermione, of all people, would balk at the impropriety of a girl living with the boys -- no matter what the girl might look like.

"Of course I do. Tonks -- er, Dorian -- is a professional and sh-- he -- is going to conduct himself professionally, I'm sure."

Dor nodded sanctimoniously to punctuate Hermione's words.

"Besides," Hermione continued, looking down at her plate, "I want you to be safe, Harry, and if there's someone in the school who's trying to kill you--"

"No one here is trying to kill me!" Harry exclaimed, exasperated. "I'm telling you, it was an accident. It's nothing like the first two attacks; the first two times the guy was trying to kidnap me, not kill me. Why change his tactics all of the sudden?"

Hermione didn't appear to have an answer for this. She pursed her lips defiantly.

"Well," Dor said around a mouthful of food, "hopefully we'll never find out if the two are related, because hopefully there won't be any more attacks. But if there are," he pointed a fork at Harry, "we'll be ready, won't we? These chops are brilliant. Pass us another, Ron. Thanks pet."

Ron faltered passing the plate of chops.

"What?" Dor asked.

"Pet?" Ron asked uncomfortably.

Dor laughed. "Guess I'd better watch that, or people will start thinking I'm a bit dodgy." He glanced around. "Though that might not be so bad, mind you. There are some fit seventh years, aren't there, Hermione? Too bad they're too young for me..."

Harry sighed, wondering whether it might not be better to just turn himself over to his would-be kidnappers and save himself the humiliation that would undoubtedly come from having Dorian Tucker for a body guard.

Just then, someone slid onto the bench next to Harry. He looked up and found Gwyn smiling at him. "How are you feeling?" she asked.

Harry shrugged.

"And who is this lovely lady?" Dor asked, leaning across Harry towards Gwyn. "Harry, aren't you going to introduce me to your friend?"

"Er... Dor, this is Gwyn. Gwyn, this is Dorian Tucker. New Gryffindor."

Dor reached in front of Harry to shake Gwyn's hand and knocked a glass of pumpkin juice into Harry's lap.

"Whoops!" he exclaimed, drawing his wand quickly. "Sorry about that, mate. Lemme just..." He muttered a quick incantation and the juice dried. Harry frowned at him.

"Nice to meet you, Dor," Gwyn said charmingly. "I'm new this year, too. Where did you go to school before here?"

Dor grinned brightly, and Harry got the impression that he was keen on telling someone the story he'd made up for himself.

"Hong Kong," he replied. "Brilliant international magic school. My dad was stationed there on business and brought the rest of us along. Good to be back on British soil, though."

"Oh, I loved Hong Kong!" Gwyn exclaimed. "Dad took me with him once when he had a conference there." She leaned forward across Harry to be able to speak to Dor better, and Harry quickly moved his pumpkin juice out of reach. "And Asian music is so fascinating. I'm a musician, you see. Did you study any Asian culture while you were there?"

"Erm..." Dor said, looking uncomfortable. "Oh, yeah sure. Of course we did. Brilliant stuff."

Gwyn smiled, then glanced at Harry, who was frowning at Dor. "Are you sure you're feeling all right?" she asked.

Harry sighed. "I'm just tired. I think I'll turn in early." He glanced over at Dor. "Come on," he said flatly. "I'll show you where Gryffindor Tower is."

Gwyn patted him on the arm gently. "Sleep well," she said in a low voice. "I'll see you tomorrow." With that, she kissed him quickly on the cheek and left for her own table. Harry started to smile in spite of himself. He looked up and saw Ron and Dor smirking at him.

"That your girlfriend, then, Harry?" Dor asked curiously. He let out a long, low whistle.

"Well we weren't so sure there for a while," Ron quipped, "but it seems things are back on track now." He fluttered his eyelashes moronically. "Sleep well Harry," he crooned in a lusty voice, punctuating his words with kissing noises. Harry kicked him under the table.

Hermione wrinkled her nose in distaste. "Kind of fickle, isn't she? One minute she'll barely look at you, and the next..."

"Come on, Dor," Harry said testily, rising from his seat. "I was serious about turning in early." He glanced at Ron who was still giggling. "Anything to get away from these gits."

Dor smirked and obligingly followed Harry out of the Great Hall.

"So," he said conversationally, "any chance we might make it to the library tomorrow?"

Harry frowned. "Maybe," he replied. "Why?"

Dor grinned sheepishly. "Well, I figured decided I ought to find out some stuff about Hong Kong."

The next day proved to be trying. Harry awoke feeling like he hadn't slept at all and groggily swung his legs over the edge of his bed, reaching for his glasses with one hand, and scratching his head with the other. He almost killed himself as he stood and nearly collided with the new bed that had been inserted into the room for the newest Gryffindor. Harry frowned.

It wasn't that he didn't like Tonks. On any given day, he would probably have put her quite near the top of his list of favorite people; she was young, and fun, and one of the few adults he knew

who tended to treat him like a real person rather than a kid. She was good for a laugh and handy in a fight, and Harry had often daydreamed about someday working as an Auror with her and Kingsley.

Dorian Tucker, however, was another story.

Feeling inordinately grumpy, Harry dug into the bedclothes to find his missing sock, pulled it on, and stomped out of the room across the cold landing to the welcome warmth of the bathroom. Moving without thinking, Harry hung his tee shirt on a hook on the wall, and grabbed his toothbrush and a towel from the shelves, moving over to one of the two sinks. He took off his glasses to wash his face, and ran some hot water into the basin, splashing himself, trying to will himself awake.

He heard the door open behind him as he reached for his towel.

"Morning Harry."

"Morning," Harry muttered into his towel, glancing blearily in the mirror at the reflection of the brown haired boy standing behind him. Suddenly, something clicked.

He whirled around, clutching the towel in front of him like a shield.

"AHH!" he shouted, appalled.

Dor jumped and whipped his wand out of his robe pocket crouching into a fighting stance and wincing on his bad leg. "WHAT?" he shouted back.

Harry stared at him, fumbling around blindly on the edge of the sink for his glasses. They slid into the basin with a clink.

"What are you DOING?" he demanded. "Get OUT of here!"

Dor relaxed slowly, putting his wand back into his pocket and running a hand through his hair. "And go where, exactly?" he asked blandly. "You reckon I should go knock on Hermione's door and ask to use their loo?"

"Well!" Harry sputtered. "Well! You can't stay here! Not while there's other people in here!"

Dor rolled his eyes. "Harry," he said softly, "what part of body guard did you not understand? I'm supposed to follow you everywhere." He yawned and scratched the top of his head. "And unless this toilet somehow exists outside of space and time, it is included in 'everywhere,' okay?"

Harry sighed. "Fine. I am allowed to take a shower by myself, aren't I? Because if not, you're just going to have to put up with the smell, 'cause there's no way in hell--"

Dor laughed. "Of course you can. Merlin's balls, Harry. Lighten up."

He turned and headed for one of the cubicles as Harry grabbed his shirt and hastily made for the showers.

"How do I..." Dor began.

"If you complete that sentence," Harry growled, "I will be scarred for life."

Dor just laughed.

By the time they made it to Charms, Harry was already sick of his shadow. He hadn't been able to really talk to Ron or Hermione about what they thought had happened with the chimera, and who might be responsible. Even more worrisome was the fact that he thought he'd seen Gwyn batting

her eyelashes at Dor as they walked to Charms -- which was disturbing for too many reasons to count.

The class was working on advanced illusions this term, and it was rough going. Gwyn was the only person in the class -- much to Hermione's continued consternation -- who had been able to conjure a realistic looking owl as Professor Flitwick had assigned.

Harry tried to concentrate on his own non-existent owl for a few moments before realizing that, in his current state of mind, it was all but hopeless.

"Harry," Ron whispered as soon as Dor and Gwyn were occupied discussing conjuring, Hong Kong, and peacocks, "what do you reckon about Malfoy?"

"I don't know how he did it," Harry replied under his breath, "but I'd bet you anything he was behind the chimera attack."

Ron blinked at him. "Really? But how could he--" he shook his head. "That's not what I was talking about. I mean, what do you reckon about the potion Fred and George sent us? I think we should use it as soon as possible. Dinner. Tonight."

"We still don't know what it does," Harry said skeptically. "And then there's Dor."

Ron glanced over Harry's shoulder at Dor sitting on his other side. "You think he'd rat us out?"

Harry shrugged. Their conversation was interrupted as Professor Flitwick toddled by, checking on their progress, and they didn't have a chance to talk for the rest of class. Hermione finally conjured her own small, white chicken feather just before the lesson was over.

"It's all right you know," Dor said quietly as they gathered their books.

"What is?" Harry asked.

"The only thing I absolutely *have* to tell Dumbledore is if someone tries to kill you. Otherwise, mum's the word."

Harry turned to look at him sharply. "You heard Ron and me talking?" he asked.

Dor nodded. "Superhuman Auror hearing," he said with a serious face. "But seriously, it would be total crap if you had to worry about me ratting you outtelling on you all the time, I know. So we'll call a truce, OK? As long as it doesn't have to do with your overall health and wellbeing, no one's going to find out about it from me, right?"

Harry thought about this for a moment, decided he didn't have much of a choice, and nodded. Dor grinned happily. "So," he whispered conspiratorially, "what are you planning to do to Malfoy at dinner?"

Harry shouldered his bag and shrugged. "You'll see."

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE: True Confessions

"So" Dor said happily as he grabbed for a sandwich at the lunch table and knocked over a bowl of grapes. "What's next? Transfiguration? I'm brilliant at Transfiguration."

"Potions" Harry replied glumly. Dor stopped chewing and stared at him with disgust.

"Does Professor Snape know who you are" Hermione asked quietly.

Dor shook his head. "At least, I don't think so" he admitted. "Ahh, Harry! Why couldn't you just get an acceptable on your Potions Owl and then drop it like a normal person" Harry shrugged and Hermione looked vaguely scandalized.

"Didn't you have to have Potions to get into Auror training" she asked.

"Yeah" Dor sighed "but that doesn't mean I had to *like* it..."

Ron swallowed half of his sandwich in a few bites and then leaned forward conspiratorially towards Harry. "So" he said in a low voice. "How do you suppose we should do it"

Harry shrugged. Next to him, Dor leaned forward across, a serious look on his face. "Do what" he whispered loudly to Ron, who frowned.

"Dunno if I should tell you that" he said, straightening up.

"And why not" Dor demanded, crossing his arms. "I thought we were mates, Ron."

Ron shrugged and looked uncomfortable. "Yeah, but you're like..." he lowered his voice to barely a whisper "like an *adult*. You'll dob us all in. It's your job."

Dor snorted derisively. "I'm here" he replied in the same hushed tones "to protect Harry against any fire-breathing nasties that want to do him in." Harry frowned at him, but Dor ignored him. "There is nothing in my job description about pulling your sorry arse out of the fire by running to Dumbledore or McGonagall every time you decide to do something stupid."

Hermione laughed and Ron shot her a nasty look.

"So what's it all about" Dor persisted. "I'm dying to know now you've made such a big old deal out of it."

Ron glanced around suspiciously to ensure that no one else was listening. "Fred and George sent us a potion."

Dor nodded sagely. "And. What does it do"

Ron blinked a couple of times.

"He doesn't know" Hermione said loudly. Ron glared at her. "Well you don't" she said defensively.

"Well that's half the fun, isn't it" Ron retorted somewhat unconvincingly. "We'll know what it does as soon as it starts doing it."

Hermione shook her head. "I still say you should write to your brothers and just ask them what it does. What if it sets the school on fire, or turns everything into a swamp"

Dor laughed. "I wouldn't put it past them. I'm just glad they're on our side"

"Do you reckon we're supposed to get him to drink it" Harry asked. "Or just pour it on him somehow."

"Oh he has to drink it" Ron said certainly.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "And what makes you think that"

Ron shrugged. "'S just logical, isn't it"

Harry sighed. Secretly, he was beginning to side with Hermione; it seemed awfully risky to force feed an unknown potion from the twins to anybody - even Malfoy.

Without thinking, Harry cast his gaze across the room to the Ravenclaw table where Gwyn was just getting to her feet. She caught his eye and smiled.

"Best be off" he said quickly, grabbing his satchel. "We can figure out what to do after class."

He sprang to his feet before Dor could say anything and hurried across the Hall towards Gwyn who was waiting for him by the door.

"You look awfully eager to get to class" she said with a coy smile, falling into step next to him as they passed through the doors. "Looking forward to an afternoon in the dungeons"

Harry smiled as he reached for her hand. "Not even a little bit" he replied. "But I am looking forward to an afternoon with you."

Gwyn beamed at him. "You know" she said quietly "I've been meaning to play that song I wrote for you." She squeezed his fingers. "Maybe we could meet in the practice room tonight after dinner. You don't have Quidditch tonight, do you?"

Harry's mind reeled happily as he thought about the chance of spending some time alone with Gwyn. "No, our next practice isn't until"

"Hey, Harry! Gwyn! Wait for me"

Gwyn turned to look over her shoulder and Harry groaned inwardly. Dor was rushing up to them as fast as his bad leg would carry him, clomping unevenly along the corridor with his cane.

"Hey" he said with a brilliant grin. "Thanks for waiting! I'm not sure I would be able to find the dungeons without a guide. Do you think you can show me?"

"You go straight down" Harry growled. "Can't miss it."

Gwyn frowned at him. "Of course we'll show you" she said to Dor, smiling kindly, and slowing down so that he could fall comfortably into step beside them.

"Where's Hermione" Harry asked pointedly. "I thought she could show you the way to the dungeons."

Dor shrugged innocently as he clomped along. "Said something about a book she forgot. And it tires me so to go up and down the stairs more than I have to..." Gwyn smiled sympathetically at Dor "that I thought I'd just try to catch up to you."

"If you don't mind me asking" Gwyn said "what happened to your leg?"

"Quidditch injury" Dor said promptly. "Fell about fifty feet and my leg got all twisted up under me. Nasty break. The bone's all right now, but I've still got some muscle and nerve damage."

Gwyn nodded, her eyes wide and impressed.

Harry held the door to the dungeon open while the others passed through, waiting for Dor. As they approached an empty table, Harry gave him a suspicious look.

"Quidditch injury" he whispered. "Would that be in Hong Kong?"

Dor just grinned. "Good job trying to lose me, by the way" he whispered as he dug his potions ingredients out of his bag "but you'll have to be a lot cleverer than that."

"Is that a challenge" Harry whispered back. Dor didn't reply.

Harry looked up and saw Snape staring down his nose at them. "What have we here" he asked in a bored tone. "Not *another* member of the Potter fan club, surely."

Dor knocked his stool over in his haste to stand up, leaning forward on the table. "Dorian Tucker, sir, at your service" Several students around the room snickered. Harry slumped down lower on his stool.

Snape scowled as though Dor were something slimy he wanted to scrape off of the desk. "Sit down, Mr. Tucker, and kindly endeavor to keep your mouth shut for the remainder of the lesson."

Dor sat back down quickly and winked at Harry.

"A scar-head and a cripple" Malfoy sneered as soon as Snape's back was turned to the blackboard. "How droll."

"Shut it Malfoy" Harry growled through clenched teeth. Dor simply grinned at Malfoy in amusement.

"You really know how to pick your friends, don't you, Potter? Cripes, weasels, mudbloods, and whores." He glanced meaningfully at Gwyn and Hermione sitting on the other side of the room. "Honestly, you can have them."

"Watch your mouth" Dor said sharply, his grin vanishing.

Malfoy raised his eyebrows in mild surprise, but didn't have a chance to say more, as Snape turned to begin his lecture.

Harry tried to concentrate on Snape's voice, droning on and on about the Draught of a Thousand Daggers they were going to begin brewing, but his thoughts kept drifting back towards Gwyn and Hermione working quietly in the corner. Gwyn's head was bent low over the desk as she copied down facts from the blackboard; her hair fell into her face and she paused a moment to tuck it back over her ear, chewing on the end of her quill as she listened.

Harry glanced back over at Malfoy who, he discovered, had been watching him. Malfoy smiled a vile, black smile and Harry felt the anger welling up within him. *He thinks he got away with it*, he realized as he clenched his hands into fists.

Ron was right. It was time to get Malfoy once and for all.

"I've got two galleons says it makes his head explode."

"You're crazy. Fred and George are evil bastards, but they wouldn't kill anybody. Not on purpose, at any rate."

"Well, what do you think it will do then"

"I'm leaning towards unholy stench. They're awfully good at that."

"What? Stinking"

"Well, yeah. Or making other things stink."

"I think it'll be some sort of disfiguration though. Maybe turning him neon pink with flowers all over."

"Maybe it'll turn him into a girl"

Harry glanced up at that point to raise an eyebrow at Ron and Dor who were cackling mischievously over the little blue vial from Fred and George. "Don't we have enough gender confused students already" he asked.

Dor winked at him.

Harry sighed. "I'm not so sure this is a good idea. What if it really does make his head explode, or turn purple or something"

"Harry" Ron said patiently "do you want to get back at Malfoy or not" He shook the little vial in Harry's face. "This potion is our best chance to get him without getting caught. Whatever it is."

Harry scowled. "Whatever it is, it won't be bad enough. Not by half."

Dor frowned. "What'd he do that's got your knickers in such a twist? I mean, after five years, I wouldn't think his taunts would bother you any more."

Harry shook his head, not wanting to talk about it.

Hermione appeared at the bottom of the stairs to the girls' dormitories, her arms loaded with an enormous stack of books. Ron quickly pocketed the vial.

"Ix-nay on the ial-vay around ermione-Hay" he hissed.

Dor rolled his eyes. "That's brilliant Ron. She'll never crack that code." But he was silent as Hermione approached.

"What are all those for" Harry asked, standing and grabbing a few books from Hermione's stack. She smiled at him gratefully.

"Oh, just some extra research I've been doing because of... Well." She looked away. "Just some extra research."

Harry frowned as he followed the others out of the portrait hole and down towards the Great Hall. He had hoped that Hermione and the others had got over the shock of hearing the prophecy by now and would soon come back to their senses. There was nothing they could do to help, and by trying, they would likely only get themselves killed.

Harry took a deep breath and resisted the urge to toss Hermione's books in the lake. If it made her feel better to do hours of pointless research, who was he to judge?

Once in the Great Hall, Hermione took a seat farther down the table and spread her books out around her. "Sorry, no time to talk" she explained. "I've got much too much to do..."

"Just as well" Ron whispered, deliberately taking a seat with a clear view of Malfoy, who was sitting at the Slytherin table on the opposite side of the room.

"How are we going to do this" Harry asked, beginning to feel the anticipation building in his stomach. "I mean, how are we going to get it into his food" He glanced up at Ron. "We are agreed that it's supposed to go in his food, aren't we"

"We'll just levitate it over there and dump it in" Ron said, drawing his wand and pushing up the sleeves of his robes. "I'll aim for his drink."

Harry put out a hand to stop him. "Don't you think it will look a little odd, a vial floating around by itself" he asked. "Use your head, Ron. Nobody can know it was us, or we'll be serving detentions for McGonagall until we're thirty."

Ron frowned, but Harry had an idea.

"Leave it to me" he said, drawing his own wand. Harry held out his hand for the vial, which Ron passed to him, reluctantly.

He concentrated for a moment, then tapped the top of the vial with his wand. Nothing happened.

"Brilliant" Ron said sarcastically.

"Got any better ideas" Harry retorted.

"Merlin's beard you two are hopeless" Dor said with a snigger. "What were you trying to do to it, Harry? Poke a hole in it"

Harry frowned. "I was *trying* to disillusion it." Dor grinned smugly again and Harry narrowed his eyes in concentration and tapped the vial again. This time, however, he watched as a sort of silvery liquid flowed over the vial, and where the liquid had been, the vial suddenly wasn't.

"Woah" Ron whispered, well impressed.

Harry grinned, handing the now invisible vial back to him. As the vial moved, however, Harry could see where the edges of it were blurred slightly.

"No one should notice it now" he said triumphantly.

Ron concentrated on the disillusioned vial and yanked the stopper out.

"Don't spill any" Harry cautioned.

He nodded. Still concentrating, he pointed his wand at the invisible vial and said "*Mobilizarbus*."

"Hi guys" Gwyn said cheerfully, taking a seat on the bench next to Harry. All three boys jumped. Ron grimaced, then shoved his wand under the table, pretending to be very interested in his dinner plate as he continued guiding the vial.

"Hi" Harry said quickly, trying to keep Gwyn's attention away from Ron. "How are you"

Gwyn gave him a curious look as she started dishing food onto her plate. "Fine. And I was fine when you saw me after Potions, twenty minutes ago." She smiled at him amusedly. "How are you Dor? What do you think of our illustrious Potions Master"

"What" Dor asked, tearing his eyes away from Ron. "Oh, Snape? He's a git."

Gwyn smiled. "That seems to be the general consensus." She glanced at Dor, then at Harry inquisitorily. "Aren't you guys going to eat anything"

"Oh! Right" Harry said, fully aware that his voice was too loud. He grabbed the nearest bowl and began dishing brussels sprouts onto his plate. Ron's tongue was sticking out of the corner of his mouth in concentration. Suddenly, his shoulders relaxed and he took a deep breath.

"Done" he whispered out of the side of his mouth. "I put it in his drink. I think."

Harry glared at him in disbelief. "You *think*" he hissed. "Where's the empty vial"

Ron shrugged. "I wonder how long we'll have to wait"

Suddenly, the group of Slytherins sitting around Malfoy began to laugh.

"What's going on" Harry asked. Ron shook his head.

"I can't see" Dor complained, craning his neck. "Has it started"

"Has what started" Gwyn asked, looking confused.

Malfoy was apparently talking, and the Slytherins were all laughing at what he was saying, but he was still his normal color, and his head was still its normal size. He started to stand up.

"I don't think that's it..." Harry said. "Is it"

The Hufflepuffs sitting behind Malfoy also began laughing. Several were turning around in their seats to stare at him, as he very calmly stood up on the bench. He had not stopped talking

"...dresses until I was three..."

"Louder" a burly seventh year Slytherin called. "We can't hear you, Malfoy"

"I still sleep with a night light" Malfoy replied, obligingly, in a much louder voice. As the volume increased, however, Harry heard something odd in his tone. It wasn't the self-confident drawl Malfoy usually spoke with. Half the students in the hall had stopped to snicker and stare.

"I think it's started" Ron said with an evil grin.

"What *is* he doing" Gwyn asked.

"What else, Malfoy" Theodore Nott jeered. "Tell us another"

"I'm afraid of house elves" Malfoy replied in the same eerie sing-song voice. A roar of laughter followed. Someone from the Hufflepuff table threw a brussels sprout at him. It struck Malfoy in the leg, but he never even flinched.

"What's going on" Hermione asked, hurrying up the table from where she'd been working.

"Louder, Malfoy" the same seventh year demanded. "On the table, where everyone can see you"

Malfoy turned and stepped up onto the Slytherin table, one foot planted firmly in his roast beef. "I've been taking dancing lessons since I was ten" he shouted.

Ron began to snicker into his hand. Dor was smirking appreciatively across the room. Hermione and Gwyn still looked rather confused.

Now that he was facing them, Harry could see that Malfoy's expression was utterly blank, his eyes glazed and unfocused as he spoke. It made Harry uncomfortable to watch.

"Mister Malfoy" Professor Snape was striding down from the high table wearing an expression he generally reserved for the likes of Harry and Neville.

Malfoy turned to look Snape directly in the eye and shouted "I cheat on my History of Magic exams."

Professor Snape stopped in his tracks, looking dumbfounded. "Get down from there at once, and stop behaving like a fool" he ordered.

Malfoy stepped down onto the bench, taking half of his dinner with him and said "I wet the bed until I was nine" right to Snape's face.

Ron exploded with laughter, along with most of the hall. He doubled over, rocking back and forth on the bench. Harry, too, began to laugh despite his misgivings. Hermione narrowed her eyes at them.

"Did you do this" she demanded.

"I failed Defense Against the Dark Arts" Malfoy roared, still apparently trying to be heard over the din in the Hall. Professor McGonagall was now also out of her seat and headed towards the Slytherin table.

"*Finite incantatem!*" Snape incanted, pointing his wand at Malfoy. Malfoy merely blinked blankly at him.

"I asked Gwendolyn Griffiths four times for a date, and she turned me down."

Harry immediately stopped laughing. "What" he blurted, turning to Gwyn. Her face had gone brilliantly red as half of the student body looked away from Malfoy and turned to stare at her. "You never told me he"

"It wasn't any of your business" she retorted angrily.

Harry realized that things were getting quickly out of hand.

"*Silencio!*" Professor McGonagall said, trying to stem the flow of confessions from Malfoy's mouth as Professor Snape dragged him down off of the bench.

"My father is in prison" Malfoy barked, undeterred.

"Wow" Ron giggled, wiping tears from his eyes. "It's better than I ever dreamed."

"I knew it" Hermione exclaimed. "This is because you gave him that potion Fred and George sent you, isn't it"

"Keep your voice down, Hermione" Harry hissed.

"Wait" Gwyn said turning to look at him. "You did this"

"I" Harry began.

"Is it Veritiserum" Hermione demanded.

Dor shook his head. "Veritiserum wouldn't have him just shouting his head off like that. You have to ask someone specific questions with that."

"Not to mention it's *illegal!*" Ron said, his mirth turning quickly to worry. "The lads wouldn't send us something illegal - would they"

Snape was dragging Malfoy out of the Hall by one arm, but Malfoy was still shouting. People from different houses began to clap and catcall as he left.

"Encore" someone shouted.

"I attacked Gwendolyn in the courtyard after Halloween" Malfoy's voice boomed as Snape dragged him towards the doors. Snape paused, despite himself.

"What" he demanded, staring at Malfoy.

"I snuck up behind her, grabbed her, and cast a silencing spell and a binding charm. Then I..."

Snape's eyes widened as he listened. He gave Malfoy a rough shove on the shoulder and the door slammed shut behind them.

The raucous cheering in the Hall dropped off sharply, replaced by nervous laughter, muttering, and the almost-audible swish of heads snapping around to stare at Gwyn. Her face had suddenly gone very pale, her eyes wide. Harry felt his own mouth drop open in horror.

Across the room, Professor McGonagall had rounded up Nott and the loud mouthed seventh year and had directed them to follow Professor Snape. At Malfoy's words, however, she turned sharply and started walking straight for the Gryffindor table, quieting the few remaining pockets of jeering as she passed. Professors Dumbledore and Flitwick stood from their seats at the high table and began to make their way over as well.

"Oh no" Gwyn whispered, shaking her head slightly. "Oh no, no, no, no, no..." She turned to stare at Harry. "How *could* you"

"I didn't know it would" Harry began.

"Miss Griffiths" Professor Flitwick squeaked, reaching them first. "Miss Griffiths, is this true"

"I..." Gwyn seemed to lose her voice midstream. She lowered her head and stared at the table in front of her.

"I suggest we discuss this somewhere less public" Professor Dumbledore suggested, coming up behind her. "My office, *Fillius*" Professor Flitwick nodded and hurried towards the doors.

Gwyn looked around helplessly, then stood to follow the headmaster out of the Hall, hundreds of eyes still watching her every move.

Harry watched her go, a hard pit of guilt forming in his stomach as conversation slowly returned to normal in the Hall. If he had been worried about what Gwyn would think when she found out that Ron and Hermione knew about the attack, it was nothing compared to what he was feeling now that the whole school knew.

"What do you suppose they'll do..." Dor said, turning to look at Harry. He froze, mid-sentence when he saw the look on Harry's face. "You knew..."

"Shhh" Ron hissed as Professor McGonagall strode up to them. They all looked up at her as she stared down at them, hands on her hips.

"I don't suppose any of you would happen to know what compelled Mr. Malfoy to put on such a display, would you" she asked icily.

Ron shrugged, trying to look innocent and failing badly.

"Because" Professor McGonagall continued, narrowing her eyes at him "I would hate to find out that this was some *joke shop* experiment gone awry."

Ron quickly lowered his head to study his roast beef. McGonagall's eyes flicked over to Harry who felt quite sure he couldn't have looked any guiltier if he'd tried, then to Dor who was smiling genially, and finally to Hermione who had taken out a book and was staring at it diligently. She huffed.

"I would like to remind you" she said sharply "that one of the tenets of Gryffindor house is *honour*." She looked around at each of them. "And that this spectacle tonight was as far from that ideal as it is possible to be." She turned and strode briskly out of the hall.

Ron sighed with relief as he began to tuck in to his dinner at last.

"I don't know what you look so smug about" Hermione whispered fiercely. "They're bound to figure out who did it."

Ron shrugged. "It was worth it. Malfoy'll *never* live this down."

"Neither will Gwyn" Harry added blackly. "I knew I shouldn't have let you convince me to do this without asking what the potion would do."

Ron set his fork down forcefully and turned to face Harry. "I didn't have to do very much convincing, you know. Besides, this is just getting him back for everything he's ever done to us, plus what he did to Gwyn."

"Harry" Dor said quietly "what *exactly* did he do to Gwyn"

Harry scowled and pushed his plate away. He was no longer hungry.

"Still think I'm going to tell" Dor asked testily.

Harry sighed. "It's not that" he insisted. "It's just that she made me promise not to say anything about it."

"Bit late for that" Ron observed. "I'll tell it if you like."

Harry glared at Ron, then glanced back at Dor, who was still waiting for an answer. "He caught her alone in a courtyard and he..." Harry couldn't find the words. He swallowed hard as a fresh wave of revulsion passed over him like a cold sweat.

"He kissed her against her will" Hermione said matter-of-factly. "It's as much as sexual assault." Dor's head swung around and he gaped at her.

"Hermione" Harry sighed. He wanted to say that was a bit strong, but realized belatedly that it was actually quite accurate.

Hermione nodded at Dor. "He pinned her against a wall, tied her hands, and kissed her. And she kicked him in the groin to get away."

Ron snorted and Hermione shot him a dangerous look. "It isn't funny, Ron" she said coldly. "How would you feel if that happened to someone close to you? How would you feel if it was Ginny we were talking about? Or me for that matter"

Ron faltered. His face went pale. "You're right" he said solemnly. "It isn't funny. Harry, why haven't you hexed him into oblivion yet"

Harry sighed heavily. "Because she told me not to" he said despondently. "Don't think it hasn't crossed my mind."

"That little prick" Dor growled, gripping his fork tightly. "That rat! That hippogriff's arse" He pointed the fork menacingly at Harry. "Why didn't you tell Dumbledore if you knew all this time"

"Because she made me promise not to" he repeated, angrily. "It was an accident that I found out about it in the first place. You think this was my decision? You think I *like it* that my girlfriend was attacked? NO" He realized he was beginning to yell and took a deep breath. "I hate Malfoy for what he did" he said in a low voice. "But I... I care about Gwyn more."

Hermione gave him an appraising look. "That's very mature of you, Harry" she said. Ron frowned.

"Well" Dor said, his eyes still blazing angrily "you were absolutely right about one thing, Harry. That little exhibition was *not* punishment enough for what he's done. Not by half."

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO: Practice

A glimmer of gold caught Harry's eye and he swerved wildly to the left, the warm evening breeze ruffling his hair and robes. As he neared the stands, the glint came slowly into focus until he could make out the blur of fluttering wings on each side. The Snitch dropped several feet and zipped

suddenly to the right, but Harry followed, gaining on it with every turn. He heard a cheer from the stands as his fingers closed around the struggling wings and he pulled up hard on his broom handle, slowing his descent towards the rapidly approaching ground.

In the stands, Hermione and Dor were clapping and cheering for him, and above him, his teammates had paused their practice to watch his dive.

"We're going to kick the Hufflepuffs' fury yellow BUTTS on Saturday!" Andrew roared, swinging his Beater's bat around his head like a baton. "Those brainless badgers won't know what hit 'em!"

"Good catch, Harry," Ginny said breathlessly as she flew up beside him.

"Thanks," he replied with a grin. Dor had started shouting weird cheers he had made up, but only every second or third word drifted across the pitch to them, making the chants completely incomprehensible. "How's everybody feeling?" Harry asked, looking around the impromptu circle that his team had formed. Most grinned or nodded, and Andrew started doing a little jig on his broom.

"Fit as a fiddle and ready for lo-oove!" he sang off tune, and everybody laughed.

Suddenly, Dor's cheering turned to boos and hisses.

"Hey!" Andrew protested, swinging around to face the stands. "My dancing isn't *that* bad! I... Uh-oh."

Harry turned to look. At the far end of the pitch, seven figures dressed in green robes were emerging from the changing rooms.

"Come *on* then..." Andrew swore softly, glaring at the assembling Slytherins.

"What do they think they're doing?" Katie demanded. "We booked the pitch for this evening."

"I'll go and check it out," Harry replied, releasing the struggling Snitch from his fist.

"I'll come with you," Ron added quickly. As Harry dove off towards the far end of the pitch, however, it wasn't only Ron behind him. His entire team fell into formation, ready to square off against the Slytherins. Harry glanced over towards the stands and saw Hermione chasing after Dor, who was quickly making his way down towards the pitch.

"What d'you think you're doing?" Harry demanded, landing easily and jogging up to Bletchley, the Slytherin team captain.

"We've got special dispensation to practice tonight," Bletchley said with a yellow toothed grin, "from Professor Snape."

"They've tried this before," Katie said loudly from behind Harry. "You steal all your tricks from Flint, Bletchley? Maybe you'll fail all your N.E.W.T.s and stay on an extra year like him, too."

Bletchley shot her a supremely unconcerned look. "Sticks and stones, Bell. I've got a note."

"Ooo..." Andrew shivered. "Watch out. He's got a *note!*"

Harry snatched the parchment out of Bletchley's outstretched fingers, his eyes quickly running over the familiar script. "...Owing to the need to train their new Seeker..." he read aloud. "What new Seeker?"

Crabbe and Goyle stepped aside to reveal Theodore Nott standing between them, grinning like an idiot. Harry gave him an incredulous look.

"Where's Malfoy?" he asked, turning his attention back to Bletchley.

"None of your bloody business, Potter," Bletchley spat. "Now either get off the pitch or budge over and get ready to share."

"No way!" Ginny cried angrily. "We were here first, we reserved the pitch first, and we're not going anywhere. You can just wait!"

"Watch your mouth, little weasel," Nott simpered, "or we might have to teach you a lesson."

"I'd like to see you try!" Ron snarled, pushing forward. Ginny caught him by one arm.

"Wait a minute, wait a minute!" Andrew shouted, holding up his arms. "I've got a brilliant idea." His dark eyes glinted mischievously as he glanced around the group. "What would you say to a little practice match?"

Bletchley narrowed his eyes. "I don't know," he said slowly. "We've never even practiced with our new See-"

"Best way to learn is to jump right in," Andrew interjected with a malicious grin at Nott. "Wouldn't you say so, Harry?"

Harry glanced from Andrew over to Nott, who had suddenly gone several shades whiter, his freckles standing out darkly across the bridge of his enormous nose. "Oh yeah," Harry said with a smile. "That's the only way to learn." He glanced back at Bletchley. "Unless you're afraid you'll lose."

Bletchley frowned. "Give us five minutes to warm up," he growled, "and we'll wipe the pitch with you losers." He motioned over his shoulder for the rest of the Slytherins to take off.

Dor and Hermione came striding across the grass; Dor did not look happy.

"What's going on?" Hermione asked breathlessly. "Why are they here?"

"Quick grudge match," Andrew said happily, stretching his arms and swinging his bat about. "Should be over in no time. That Nott's a rubbish flyer - even worse than Sloper is!"

"Hey!" Jack said, shoving Andrew, who promptly turned and tackled him to the ground.

"Harry," Dor said quietly taking him off to one side. "I'm not sure this is such a good idea."

"Why not?" Harry asked, shrugging away from Dor's grasp.

"Hello?" Dor said quietly, knocking his fist on Harry's forehead. "Assassins? Kidnappers? Rampaging chimeras?" He crossed his arms and frowned. "Any of this ringing a bell?"

"And you think that one of *them* is the attacker?" Harry asked skeptically, pointing to the green robed figures flying after the Quaffle.

"How much do you know about any of them, Harry?" Dor countered. "I mean really *know*? At this point, anyone who had access to you during your Care of Magical Creatures class is a suspect - which means everyone at Hogwarts."

Harry opened his mouth to protest, but was interrupted by Katie shouting that they were ready to go. He quickly backed away from Dor.

"It's just Quidditch," he said, exasperated as Ron tossed him the Quaffle. "Nobody's died in years!"

Dor frowned.

Harry turned back and threw the Quaffle to him. "You start us off, alright?"

Dor was still frowning, but he followed Harry towards the center of the pitch. Harry jogged a few steps and got a running start onto his broom, leaping into the air and swooping up to face Nott, who looked as though someone had just poured a pitcher of ice water down the back of his robes.

"Snitch and Bludgers are already loose," Harry called to Bletchley, "and Dor's going to release the Quaffle. Same rules as a regular match."

Bletchley nodded mutely as he turned and headed for one set of goals. Harry caught Ron's eye, nodded, and Ron took off to defend the other side.

"Right, then!" Dor shouted from below them. He hurled the Quaffle straight into the air and Ginny caught it smoothly, darting between the Slytherin Chasers with Katie and Will flanking her on either side.

Harry took off in the other direction at lightening speed, hoping to confuse and disorient the Slytherin Chasers. Nott tried vainly to follow, but he was nowhere near as good a flier even as Malfoy. Harry glanced up in time to see Ginny pass the Quaffle to Will, who scored easily against Bletchley. Hermione was clapping wildly from the stands; Dor, however, was standing on the pitch watching the action with a serious expression, one hand shoved deep in the pocket of his robes.

Harry frowned, making a quick turn that almost sent the clumsily following Nott crashing into the stands. These Slytherins were a nasty bunch, rotten to the core, but they were hardly assassins. A Bludger whistled past Harry and he rolled easily to one side. Behind him, Nott grunted as the ball grazed his broom, sending him spinning off course.

One of the Slytherin Chasers had the Quaffle now, and Harry veered upwards to watch as they headed straight for Ron. Crabbe was chasing a Bludger, and whacked it hard with his bat. Harry's eyes widened.

"Ron!" he shouted, but it was too late. Preoccupied with guarding his goals, Ron never saw the Bludger coming. It crashed into his left shoulder, knocking him off his broom. Harry dove immediately towards the goal hoops as the Slytherins scored.

Just then, Harry saw it: a golden glint in the failing evening light. As he sped towards Ron, lying crumpled on the ground, he swooped down near the grass, one arm extended in front of him and easily scooped the Snitch up into his waiting fingers. Nott was at the absolute opposite end of the pitch. Harry slowed to a stop and jumped off his broom.

In the air over the pitch, the Gryffindors were yelling.

"Foul!" Jack roared. "Bad form!"

"You all right, mate?" Harry panted, rushing up to Ron.

"My arm..." Ron groaned.

"Ron!" Ginny shouted, dismounting and letting her broom fall as she ran up to kneel next to her brother. Above them, Crabbe and Goyle were snickering as the Slytherin chasers continued tossing the Quaffle through the goals.

"Time out!" Katie called, waving at Bletchley, who had left his position by the Slytherin goals. He shook his head.

"No ref, no fouls, no time outs," he said with a sneering grin.

"Doesn't matter," Harry said angrily, "the game's over." He held his fist up and showed them all the struggling Snitch.

"You cheated!" Nott squealed unhappily.

"How exactly did he cheat?" Katie demanded. "By being a better flier? By seeing the Snitch first?"

"Shut up Mudblood!" Bletchley shouted.

"Hey!" Andrew yelled landing a few feet away and running up to the group. "That's no way to speak to a lady!" He drew his wand and pointed it at Bletchley's face. "Take it back!"

"If that's a lady, then I'm a flobberworm," Bletchley replied pushing up the sleeves of his robe to reveal his wand strapped to his wrist.

"Woah," Harry said quickly stepping between the two. "It's over, alright!"

"Because you cheated!" Nott spat. "You released the Snitch - you knew where it was the whole time! Nobody could catch it that quickly otherwise."

"How could he possibly-" Katie began.

"Nobody cheated," Ginny interjected. "You're just sore losers."

"Nobody asked you, weasel," Nott snarled, stepping towards Ginny.

Ron growled low in the back of his throat.

"Enough!" Harry shouted. "I should have known we couldn't have a fair game with you lot. We're done here."

Hermione and Dor came hurrying up to the group. Hermione dropped to her knees next to Ron and started gently prodding his shoulder. Ron winced and hissed through his gritted teeth.

"You've dislocated his shoulder," she said, her voice shaking slightly with anger. "You're lucky I don't dock you points before I march back up to the school right now and turn you in! That was an illegal foul and you did it *deliberately*." She glared at Crabbe, who looked confused and slightly worried. "But I'm feeling generous, so if you get out of here *right now*, I'll let it slide."

Bletchley narrowed his eyes at her. "Take your wounded and get off the battlefield, Potter," he said menacingly, "or his arm won't be the only thing on your team that's broken." He whistled sharply through his teeth and the Slytherins took off again, en masse.

"Let's get him to Madam Pomfrey," Harry said with a sigh.

"That's alright," Hermione said briskly. "I can fix it." She drew her wand and glanced up at Harry. "Hold him," she said firmly.

"Why?" Ron demanded, shrinking away from Hermione. "What are you going to do to me?"

"Are you sure, Hermione?" Harry asked hesitantly. "I'm not sure anyone should be fixing broken bones except for Madame Pomfrey..."

"I'm sure," she replied, taking off her cloak and laying it neatly on the ground. "And it's not broken, just dislocated."

Harry nodded at Andrew who came over and knelt by Ron's feet. Harry took hold of his right side, and Andrew sat on his legs so that he couldn't wiggle.

"I think I want to go to hospital!" Ron worried, his eyes large.

"*Emmendo*," Hermione said. A flash of blue flashing light erupted from the tip of her wand and Ron howled.

"There," she said matter-of-factly, gently touching Ron's shoulder as he whimpered pitifully. "That's done it. We'll get you a sling from the hospital wing on the way to dinner." Hermione smiled at him kindly and took his hand in both of hers. "They're having Shepard's Pie. Your favorite."

Ron sniffed, looking from Hermione to his shoulder as Harry and Andrew helped him get to his feet. "You should warn a bloke before you do something like that," he said petulantly, allowing her to lead him back towards the castle.

Harry glanced up at the green blurs flying around in the dusky darkness above them as he turned back to the rest of his team. "Let's call it a night," he said, jerking his head towards the changing rooms.

"But Harry," Ginny protested, "we were here first. It's our night to practice. They should just bugger off."

Harry shook his head. "It's not worth it." He glanced up again. "Besides," he added with a shrug, "they need the practice a lot more than we do."

Andrew guffawed loudly at that, slung an arm around Jack's shoulders, and the two of them sauntered off towards the changing rooms. Will and Katie fell into step behind them. Ginny gave the Slytherins one last menacing look before following.

Dor fell into step next to Harry, leaning heavily on his cane as he walked.

Harry paused with his hand on the door. Dor stood behind him, waiting expectantly. "You're not coming in here," Harry said firmly.

"Harry..." Dor began with a sigh, but Harry cut him off with a shake of his head.

"Team members only," he said firmly. "Male team members only, at that," he added under his breath. "So stand guard by the door if you want, but you're not coming in."

Dor frowned at him. "Alright, I'll wait out here," he replied, "but you should remember something: I'm not on your Quidditch team, Harry. I don't take orders from you."

Harry rolled his eyes and threw open the door to the changing rooms, leaving Dor alone outside in the dark.

Harry and Dor didn't speak much for the remainder of that evening, and Harry did his best to ignore him through breakfast the next morning, but as he stood to make his way to his Occlumency lesson, Dor stood to follow.

"How exactly are you planning to explain your presence to Professor Lindell?" Harry demanded hotly as they walked, Dor clomping along slowly beside him.

"I won't. I'll just wait for you outside."

Harry put on a look of mock surprise. "Are you sure? You don't think she's going to try to hex me or kidnap me or feed me to her potted plant?"

"I'm just trying to keep you safe, Harry."

Harry shoved his hands deep into his pockets, refusing to meet Dor's gaze. "So everyone's a suspect - except Professor Lindell."

Dor shrugged. "She's a professor. Dumbledore wouldn't have taken her on if he wasn't sure of her loyalties."

Harry snorted. "Right," he said acerbically. "'Cause Dumbledore has such a good track record there, hiring Quirrel, who had Voldemort living in his *head*, and Moody, who wasn't *really* Moody, and -"

Dor stopped abruptly. "Don't do that," he said fiercely. "Dumbledore has made mistakes, but we all have, and if we can't trust him..." He trailed off and shook his head.

"I'm not saying we shouldn't trust him," Harry huffed, "I just don't think he's got the answers that everybody seems to think he does."

Dor stared at him. "You think you could do better?" he demanded.

Harry scowled. "I shouldn't have to. If he was really the great wizard everybody says he is, I wouldn't have to worry about all of this—" he threw his hands in the air.

"That isn't fair, Harry," Dor said, crossing his arms across his chest. "He's one of the greatest wizards that has ever lived, but he's still human." Dor looked at him seriously. "Besides, he's our best hope. I mean, I *know* that if anyone is going to be able to defeat Voldemort, it's him, so we have to give him all our support."

Harry scoffed. "You don't know anything," he mumbled and started marching up the corridor again as quickly as he could, angrily relishing the sound of Dor stomping along behind him, struggling to keep up.

He knocked at the door to Professor Lindell's office, then turned back to look at Dor, just rounding the corner. "I thought you were cool, Tonks," he said.

Dor stopped and stared at him, his mouth pursed in a frown. "Yeah?" he said. "I thought you were too, Harry."

Before Harry could answer, Professor Lindell opened the door, and he stormed inside.

"Good morning to you too, sunshine," she said sarcastically, shutting the door behind him. "You look like you got up on the wrong side of the bed."

Harry frowned, slumping down into the leather wingback and rubbing his forehead as Lindell seated herself behind the desk.

"Want to tell me about it?" she asked briskly. Harry shook his head. "Good. I'll just find out for myself then, shall I? *Legillimens*."

Harry started slightly as he felt Professor Lindell reaching her way into his mind. Angrily he snapped his defenses into place, picturing his Centre, and clearing his mind of but a single thought: *no*.

"That's very good, Mr. Potter," Professor Lindell said after a few moments. "Very good. I'm very pleased with your progress." She set her wand on the desktop and began shuffling through her endless piles of papers. "Now. On to more pressing business." She found what she was looking for at last and passed it across the desk to Harry.

It was a small leather bound diary. Harry opened the cover and flipped through a few pages experimentally; they were all blank.

"What's this?" he asked curiously.

"That is your new dream diary," Professor Lindell replied. Harry made a face and she raised an eyebrow in amusement. "You're welcome."

"Oh, yeah, I mean, thank you," Harry replied quickly. "It's just, I don't think I'm really very good at dream diaries. Professor Trelawney asked us to keep them once, and I could never remember any to write down." He fingered the edge of the leather binding. "You're not going to make me try to interpret them, are you?"

Professor Lindell's other eyebrow arched. "Certainly not," she said primly. "Divination is not my field, and in any case, interpretation isn't the purpose of this exercise. But I wouldn't worry too much about being able to recall your dreams. The very process of writing down what you do remember will improve your recall dramatically."

Lindell shuffled a few more papers and found a smallish book with a simple blue cover across which the words *Lucid Dreaming* were embossed. "After our discussion about your nightmares," she continued, passing Harry the book, "I decided it would be prudent to begin teaching you a way to defend yourself in your dreams."

"Defend myself?" Harry repeated, glancing down at the book. "Is lucid dreaming like unconscious dueling or something?"

Professor Lindell gave him a tolerant look. "Lucid dreaming simply means that the dreamer is aware that he or she is dreaming. Once you become aware that you are in a dream, you can take control of what happens to you."

Harry ran his fingertip over the gold letters thoughtfully. "So, the next time I have a nightmare about Voldemort, I can take control of it and start hexing him?" he asked.

The corners of Professor Lindell's mouth quirked into her odd half smile. "Something like that," she agreed, amused. "But more importantly, being in control will allow you to practice your Occlumency in sleep so that he cannot influence your dreams in the first place."

Harry glanced up at her, his expression serious. "What do I do?"

When Harry emerged from Professor Lindell's office an hour later, he found Dor sitting in a doorway a little way down the corridor. Harry didn't speak to him as he passed, watching the other boy struggling to his feet from the corner of his eye.

They made their way down to the Great Hall in silence, Dor following Harry at a distance. Harry felt as though Dor's eyes were boring holes into the back of his head and his stomach squirmed guiltily as he listened to the uneven footfalls clomping along behind him. He was torn between wanting to apologize and wanting to demand an apology.

As they entered the Great Hall, Harry turned to say something, but Dor was already streaking past him, headed for the opposite side of the room. Harry frowned, watching Dor and taking a seat at Gryffindor table; Dor was headed up the Ravenclaw table towards Gwyn, Padma, and Luna.

"What is he doing?" Harry demanded aloud.

Hermione looked up from her books towards where Harry was indicating. "Talking," she said simply.

Harry scowled at her. "Yes, I can see that. Why is he talking to *Gwyn*, that's what I'd like to know?"

"Well," Ron said as he gave up trying to cut his meat with his one good arm, "what I want to know is why *he's* still here."

Harry turned to look where Ron was indicating and saw Malfoy entering the room.

"He wasn't expelled?" Harry asked in disbelief.

Hermione shook her head slowly as she pulled Ron's plate in front of her and proceeded to cut his lunch into small even pieces. "It seems not," she said glumly. "Though we know he's not on the Quidditch team anymore. And Professor McGonagall has called an emergency prefects' meeting this evening." She shrugged, passing Ron's plate back to him. "Maybe we can find out something then."

Harry glowered as he watched Malfoy head for his regular seat with Crabbe, Goyle, and Pansy Parkinson. Unfortunately, the seat was already occupied by Nott. Malfoy didn't even say anything to them. He simply turned up his nose and headed for an empty stretch of table to sit by himself. Nott and the others began to laugh.

"Weasley!" Andrew called, sliding onto the bench next to Harry. "How's that arm? You going to be able to play tomorrow?"

"Yeah," Ron said slowly, patting his arm in the sling. "I'll be able to play. Madam Pomfrey just said I needed to rest it until the match. Hermione did a good job of fixing it." Hermione blushed slightly and turned back to her books.

Harry glanced back at the Ravenclaw table where Dor and Gwyn were talking animatedly. They both looked up and looked straight at him. Harry couldn't read Gwyn's expression. He frowned as they bowed their heads again in discussion.

"Well," Jack was saying, "Hufflepuff's been playing a stronger defense than Slytherin this year, but I think we can count on Will for a few sneak attacks."

"Yeah," Andrew laughed. "He's so ickle, the other teams don't even look at him twice - until he scores."

"What are they *talking* about?" Harry grumbled under his breath.

"Why don't you go over there and ask?" Hermione suggested.

Harry frowned at her. "Because Gwyn doesn't want to talk to me," he sulked. "And frankly, I don't blame her. I promised I wouldn't tell anyone, and I ended up telling the whole school."

"You didn't tell," Ron countered, "Malfoy did."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Right," he snorted. "That's so much better."

He chanced another glance over at the Ravenclaw table. "Uh-oh." Hermione and Ron turned around to look. Dor and Gwyn had got up and Dor was leading her over to the table. "What's he done now?" Harry grumbled.

"Ick," Andrew said distastefully. "She doesn't look happy. I think we'll leave you to it, mate." "Yeah," Jack said, watching Gwyn warily. "We'll watch the fallout from a safe distance." He slapped Harry on the back as they headed up the table. "Good luck."

Hermione rolled her eyes at them. "You're overreacting. I'm sure she just wants to talk."

"You have met Gwyn, haven't you?" Harry asked morosely. "She's not much of one for the talking."

"Hi Harry," Dor said as he and Gwyn approached. Harry opened his mouth, but Dor cut him off. "I hope you don't mind, but I told Gwyn some of the stuff you were explaining to me last night. You know, about how sorry you were, how bad you were feeling, and how her happiness was really the most important thing to you right now."

Harry realized his mouth was still hanging open and snapped it shut quickly. He glanced at Gwyn who, surprisingly, was wearing a completely un-angry, wide-eyed expression. He looked back at Dor who was sitting down opposite him at the table.

"I know, I know," Dor said quickly as though Harry had been about to protest, "you didn't want me to tell her about it, but Harry, mate, you can't keep these feelings bottled up inside all the time. You've got to let them out."

"Did you really say all those things, Harry?" Gwyn asked, her tone guarded, but obviously optimistic. Harry swallowed audibly and glanced back at Dor who was giving him an encouraging grin.

"Er, yeah," he said at last. "Yeah, I suppose so. 'Course, I don't know exactly what he told you, but..."

Gwyn leaned across the table and kissed him on the forehead, effectively cutting off the flow of words from his brain to his mouth. "I've got to go to class," she said with a tiny smile, "but I'll see you for dinner, OK Harry?"

Harry grinned stupidly at her as she walked out of the Hall, turning back to smile and wave every few steps until she was out of sight.

Harry turned back to look at Dor who was digging heartily into his lunch. Dor caught him staring.

"What?" he asked around a mouthful of chips.

"Why did you do that?" Harry asked, feeling rather ashamed of the way he'd been acting.

Dor shrugged. "'Cos I knew you were too thick to do it yourself. Pass the ketchup, will you?"

Harry passed the ketchup and opened his mouth to speak again, but Dor beat him to it.

"So, are we cool, Harry?" he asked.

Harry nodded sincerely. "Yeah," he said. "Yeah, we're cool."

"Good!" Dor said briskly, gesturing at him with a chip. He grinned mischievously. "Can't say I never did anything for you, can you?"